DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 575 CE 061 835

AUTHOR Auspos, Patricia; Sherwood, Kay E.
TITLE Assessing JOBS Participants. Issues and Trade-Offs. Papers for Practitioners.
INSTITUTION Manpower Demonstration Research Corp., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Aug 92
NOTE 79p.; Prepared for the Multi-State Technical Assistance Collaborative.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Literacy; *Diagnostic Tests; *Educational Diagnosis; Employment Potential; Employment Services; Evaluation Methods; Federal Programs; *Job Training; Literacy Education; Needs Assessment; Program Design; Program Implementation; Social Services; Vocational Aptitude; Vocational Education; *Vocational Evaluation; Vocational Interests; *Welfare Recipients
IDENTIFIERS *Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Program

ABSTRACT

This paper on assessment in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) Program for welfare recipients is intended to help administrators of JOBS programs weigh the possible benefits and drawbacks of the assessment choices they must make. Chapter 1 explains why assessment matters to JOBS administrators. Chapter 2 suggests a conceptual framework for assessment in JOBS and identifies dimensions along which assessment systems can vary. Chapter 3 discusses key issues in assessing participants' immediate employability or job readiness. Strategies and issues in assessing basic literacy, vocational abilities and interests, and social service needs are presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, respectively. Chapter 7 describes the experiences of several welfare-to-work programs in designing and implementing assessment systems. Chapter 8 reviews operational considerations that should inform JOBS administrators' decisions about assessment practices, including resource constraints, staffing, the need to tailor assessments to special populations, and information-flow issues. The conclusion reviews trade-offs in overall JOBS program design as they relate to assessment. Three types of guides to the text are provided: table of contents, summaries or key issues at the end of many chapters, and major points printed in boldface type throughout the text. (YLB)

Papers for Practitioners

Assessing JOBS Participants

Issues and Trade-offs

PATRICIA ALIS ROS
KAY E. SHERWOOD

MANPOWER DEMONSTRATION
RESEARCH CORPORATION

AUGUST 1992

MDRC

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Papers for Practitioners

Assessing JOBS Participants

Issues and Trade-offs

PATRICIA AUSPOS
KAY E. SHERWOOD

MANPOWER DEMONSTRATION
RESEARCH CORPORATION

AUGUST 1992

MDRC

This paper was prepared for the Multi-State Technical Assistance Collaborative, an MDRC project to assist states in implementing the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program established by the Family Support Act of 1988.

The development, production, and distribution of this paper were supported by the funders of the Collaborative:

The Ford Foundation
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
Northwest Area Foundation
The Skillman Foundation
State of Alabama
State of Arizona
State of Arkansas
State of Michigan
State of Oregon
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
State of Utah
State of Vermont
Commonwealth of Virginia

Dissemination of this paper is also supported by MDRC's Public Policy Outreach funders:

The Ford Foundation
The Ambrose Monell Foundation
Alcoa Foundation
Exxon Corporation
The Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation, Inc.

The authors would like to thank the following people for their comments on earlier drafts: Andy Hahn, Toby Herr, Sandie Hoback, Gregg Jackson, Demetra Nightingale, Sheila Smith, Lori Strumpf, Debbie White, and Barbara Zerzan. At MDRC, several staff members reviewed the paper at various stages, and Ed Pauly provided extensive assistance.

The findings and conclusions presented herein do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Auspos, Patricia.
Assessing JOBS participants: issues and trade-offs/Patricia Auspos and Kay E. Sherwood.
p. cm. – (Papers for practitioners)
1. Occupational training–United States. 2. Applications for positions–United States–Evaluation. 3. Vocational qualifications–United States– Evaluation. I. Sherwood, Kay E. II. Title. III. Series.
HD5715.2.A97 1992
658.3'112–dc20 92-19000
CIP

Contents

Preface

This paper is one in a series of Papers for Practitioners that was conceived, as its name suggests, with a particular audience in mind: the "doers"—in this case, the people with day-to-day responsibility for operating programs that provide services to low-income individuals and families. The series is intended to bring lessons from research to the tasks of designing and implementing such programs, and to provide an outlet for information about the practical program management and operational issues that often get less attention than bottom-line results in research documents.

Assessment in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program for welfare recipients is a topic that fits closely with MDRC's vision of Papers for Practitioners. It has not been studied systematically, but it is vitally important to JOBS participants, administrators, and caseworkers. Assessment philosophies and practices set in motion the service delivery system's response to people who come forward, although researchers have devoted more attention to service responses themselves and their effects. Assessment has gained prominence recently in the employment and training system for low-income adults, spurred in part by provisions of the Family Support Act of 1988 that created the JOBS program.

MDRC's mission is the identification and rigorous field evaluation of programs that promise to improve the life prospects of the disadvantaged. But the research projects we carry out are meaningful to practitioners only if the results—both of programs that prove successful and those that do not achieve their goals—are known and understood by the people who make decisions about which programs and policies to adopt. An understanding of the processes *inside* social programs and policies—such as how clients' capabilities, preferences, and needs are assessed—is also useful to these decision-makers, but essential to practitioners. We hope this paper contributes to that understanding.

Judith M. Gueron
President

Introduction

Programs that provide employment-related services, including education and job training, almost always start with some form of assessment to determine whether the individuals seeking to enroll can benefit from the services offered. In multi-component programs such as the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) Program for welfare recipients, created by the Family Support Act of 1988, "assessment" is the name for the process by which eligible individuals with varying characteristics are matched to different services ranging in JOBS from short-term job-search assistance to four-year college. Although the decisions made in this matching process have profound implications for the cost, operation, and effectiveness of employment programs, assessment has been infrequently studied. It remains mysterious to many of the administrators responsible for designing and managing programs to achieve specific employment-related goals. Choices about assessment practices are often delegated to vocational training specialists or intake staff.

This paper, intended for administrators of JOBS programs, conveys a simple message: **Assessment practices will shape your program in important ways, because it is through assessment that "who gets what" in JOBS is determined.** JOBS administrators need to understand their choices about assessment approaches, investigate their assessment options, and choose deliberately, based on their goals for JOBS and the best available information about how different approaches might support or conflict with those goals.

The paper raises questions that the authors believe JOBS administrators should be asking themselves, their staff, and service providers in the program. It also takes a view of client assessment in JOBS that runs counter to current trends and thinking among service providers. In our contact with JOBS programs during the last two years, we have seen an increasing emphasis on formal assessment. There is more testing going on, more one-to-one counseling about clients' options for program participation, and greater reliance on career exploration as a first step in JOBS. This trend is consistent with the JOBS program described in the Family Support Act. But it is not without costs. In this paper, we give more weight to the disadvantages of formal assessment approaches than is usual in the literature and in the field at this time, so that administrators can assess trade-offs more accurately.

Our sources include employment and training programs for nonwelfare populations as well as welfare employment programs operated under WIN (the Work Incentive Program) and WIN Demonstration auspices prior to JOBS. In recent years, the government-supported employment and training system as a whole—including programs funded through the Job Training Partnership Act of 1982 (JTPA), the national Employment Service, and the military—has devoted considerable attention to the development of reliable strategies for identifying the education needs of disadvantaged youths and adults and preparing them for employment. Now that welfare agency administrators are principally responsible for shaping JOBS programs to fit the needs of their clients, they need to be familiar with the "state of the art" in these related labor supply systems.

How To Use This Document

To make the subtopics and conclusions of this paper accessible to readers interested in particular assessment issues, three types of guides to the text are provided:

- *Table of Contents:* Readers can choose topics of interest by scanning chapter and section headings. Section headings are printed in boldface type in the text for quick identification.
- *Summaries:* At the end of many chapters is a boxed section entitled "Key Issues." (The Contents gives page numbers for these sections.) Readers can identify parts of the detailed discussion in which they have a special interest by scanning these summaries.
- *Major Points:* Throughout the text, important lessons about assessment issues are printed in boldface type. Readers can scan these to identify the issues most relevant to their programs.

The paper contains nine chapters. Chapter 1 explains why assessment matters to JOBS administrators. Chapter 2 suggests a conceptual framework for assessment in JOBS and identifies dimensions along which assessment systems can vary. **Chapter 3 discusses key issues in assessing participants' immediate employability, or job-readiness. Strategies and issues in assessing basic literacy, vocational abilities and interests, and social service needs are presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6,** respectively.

Chapter 7 describes the experiences of several welfare-to-work programs in designing and implementing assessment systems. Chapter 8 reviews operational considerations that should inform JOBS administrators' decisions about assessment practices, including resource constraints, staffing, the need to tailor assessments to special populations, and information-flow issues. **The Conclusion reviews trade-offs** in overall JOBS program design as they relate to assessment.

Although we discuss some tests and other assessment products, we do not offer endorsements or recommendations, since the appropriateness of particular methods and materials depends heavily on the character of particular JOBS programs and the communities they serve. The assessment choices that JOBS administrators make—among them, whether to purchase proprietary assessment products, borrow from other programs' materials and approaches, or develop their own assessment systems—must be framed by their own programs' objectives and designs, operating environments, budget constraints, and target populations. This document will help administrators weigh the possible benefits and drawbacks of the choices they must make.

Chapter 1

Why Worry About Assessment?

Under the Family Support Act of 1988 (FSA), states are encouraged to serve a broad segment of the welfare caseload in employment programs and to emphasize providing education and training opportunities for welfare recipients. As a result many states are operating Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) programs established by the act, which are more complex than the welfare-to-work programs typical of the 1980s. To aid in the implementation of programs that offer multiple services, JOBS requires an assessment of each participant.[1]

With the introduction of the JOBS program, variations in assessment practices have new significance. Although the overall purpose of assessment in JOBS is to develop an employability plan for each program participant, the statute and the federal regulations governing the program's operation are written broadly enough to encompass many assessment objectives and practices.[2] Neither the statute nor the regulations specify particular methodologies, strategies, or instruments, nor do they require states to administer tests. They set no time limit for conducting an initial assessment, except that applicants for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) cannot be placed in a job-search activity for more than three weeks before having such an assessment and that all initial assessments are supposed to occur within a "reasonable" amount of time.[3]

State and local administrators thus have many options. Essentially, they must design their own assessment program: choose its form and duration, decide where it fits in a sequence of JOBS activities, establish criteria specifying which program activities are appropriate for participants with different characteristics, select the methods and instruments, and formulate procedures for using the information obtained. Unfortunately, there is no consensus in the field about how such decisions should be made.

The choices that JOBS administrators make have important implications for their programs, however. As JOBS expands the range of employment-related services

---

[1]Throughout this paper, "participant" is used to refer to welfare recipients who are potential participants in JOBS, even though they may not actually attend program activities.

We use female pronouns to refer to JOBS participants because at present most are female. The number of male participants will eventually increase, given FSA requirements that states operate cash assistance programs for intact families in which the principal earner is unemployed, and that they provide a specific set of employment services for heads of these two-parent households.

[2]They only require states to conduct an initial assessment of a participant's employability by gathering information about her: (1) education and child care and other supportive-service needs; (2) proficiencies, skills deficiencies, and prior work experience; and (3) family circumstances, which may include the needs of her children. See P.L. 100-485, Sec. 201(b), creating Sec. 482(b)(1)(A) of the Social Security Act.

[3]See 45 CFR 250.41, the final rule adopted on October 13, 1989, regarding the "initial assessment and employability plan," under Subpart E, Operation of State JOBS Program/Program Components, and 45 CFR 250.60, the rule regarding the "job search program," under Subpart G, Optional Components of State JOBS Programs.

available to welfare recipients, states are adopting more complex assessment procedures than they have used in the past. The feasibility and cost-effectiveness of different assessment approaches have new importance to JOBS administrators under these conditions. Their decisions about how much of what kind of assessment to provide are doubly important because JOBS is often in competition for funds with education, job training, and other employment-related services provided to JOBS participants. In addition:

- Decisions about "who goes where" in JOBS programs are a major influence on program operations. For example, the services available in many JOBS programs include three- to four-week job-club workshops, open-ended adult basic education (ABE) and English as a second language (ESL) courses, and intensive, relatively expensive vocational skills training that lasts several months. Decisions about which welfare recipients will be assigned to these activities can affect the rate at which eligible individuals participate in JOBS, the average length of time people spend in the program, how resources are allocated among different groups of clients and types of services, completion rates, and total program costs.
- The methods employed to arrive at decisions about "who goes where"—for example, whether assessment is brief or lengthy, made up of one or many steps, carried out in one or many locations by one or many agencies—also clearly affect program operations. The number of staff members needed for assessment, their level of qualifications, the importance of inter-agency cooperation, and client-tracking procedures in all these vary.
- Although it is far too early to have reliable information about the effects of different JOBS approaches, assessment decisions that target certain people for particular activities may play a key role in determining overall program success. If some JOBS components prove more effective than others for certain participants, then accuracy in the assessment process may be critical to the effectiveness of the program.
- The JOBS program emphasizes education as a primary service for participants who lack a high school diploma (or its equivalent) and basic literacy skills. The program regulations define basic literacy as skills allowing a person to function at a level equivalent to at least grade 8.9. A key assessment question is how to determine participants' basic literacy skill levels with this degree of precision and yet avoid wasting time and resources.

Too Much Versus Too Little

JOBS administrators face two risks in choosing assessment systems for their programs. On one hand, an overly elaborate assessment process could eat up resources, delay entry into program components and employment, and reduce overall program participation. On the other hand, inadequate assessment procedures or inappropriate criteria for deciding "who goes where" could lead staff to refer participants to activities that do not succeed in increasing their employability and reducing their reliance on welfare.

Obscuring the path between these risks is a thicket of interconnections among assessment methods, program operations, and the philosophy, goals, and structure of JOBS programs. Research evidence illuminates the problem but does not offer a clear solution. For example, the research conducted on welfare employment programs operated under the Work Incentive (WIN) or WIN Demonstration structure in the 1980s underscores the importance of matching services to clients. The interventions studied in the 1980s—which were often a fixed sequence of activities beginning with an assisted job search—were found to be more effective for some of the welfare recipients required to participate (who were usually single mothers with children of school age) than for others. Specifically, most programs resulted in positive and sustained earnings gains, on average, for moderately disadvantaged welfare recipients who had received assistance before and were reapplying, sometimes after employment in jobs with limited earnings. At the same time, there was little improvement for either the most job-ready (who often leave welfare for work, but would do so even without help) or for the most disadvantaged.[4]

Together with analyses of welfare caseload dynamics—which demonstrated that long-term dependency is concentrated in a relatively small, highly disadvantaged group[5]—these findings constituted an impetus for innovations realized in JOBS. The authors of the Family Support Act hoped to improve on the effectiveness of WIN, especially for groups likely to remain dependent for many years, by expanding program options, adding education as a program response for some groups, establishing goals for serving specified target groups (including long-term welfare recipients), and introducing assessment as the mechanism for determining which services are appropriate for individual welfare recipients.

While studies of the pre-JOBS generation of welfare-to-work programs clearly show diversity within the eligible population and different program effects on different subgroups, they also have important limitations. First, the average findings for major subgroups—those described as the most job-ready, the moderately disadvantaged, and the most disadvantaged welfare recipients—masked a great deal of variation. For example, the welfare histories of participants, which were one of the most powerful characteristics correlating with program impact,[6] could still be overshadowed in any single individual by other characteristics such as education credentials, skills, or work experience. Similarly, behind the average were a few people who benefited a lot and many who did not benefit at all, as well as some who made modest gains close to the average. Consequently, the research is not much help for caseworkers who are attempting to assist individual welfare recipients.

Second, many programs of the 1980s were designed to "let the labor market decide" which participants were and were not immediately employable (or job-

---

[4]For a review of the research findings on welfare employment programs in the 1980s, see J. Gueron and E. Pauly, *From Welfare to Work* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1991).

[5]See, for example, M. Bane and D. Ellwood, *The Dynamics of Dependence: The Routes to Self-Sufficiency* (Cambridge, Mass.: Urban Systems Research and Engineering, Inc., 1983).

[6]See D. Friedlander, *Subgroup Impacts and Performance Indicators for Selected Welfare Employment Programs* (New York: MDRC, 1988).

ready) by prescribing a job-search activity first for most. As a result, little research-based information is available about other ways to assess employability. Furthermore, there have been no "side-by-side" tests (i.e., tests of matched groups in one location) comparing programs that start with individualized assessments to those that start with job search. Careful evaluations of different assessment strategies and instruments in welfare-to-work programs have not been carried out, either.[7]

Which Comes First: The Program or the Participant?

JOBS administrators also face another dilemma: Should the objectives and designs of JOBS programs drive assessment, or should assessment findings about JOBS participants drive program designs? These alternatives reflect two very different ideas about participant assessment:

1. Assessment is a method for routing eligible individuals into different service components that are designed to accomplish the overall goals of the program—for example, reducing welfare expenditures, increasing the earnings or income of welfare recipients, or reducing poverty—through their *aggregate* effects on groups.

2. Assessment enables program staff to identify the services most likely to enable *each* individual to get a job, get a good job, get off welfare, or get out of poverty.

In the first case, predetermined program goals and designs dictate assessment approaches: People are fitted to the program. In the second, individuals' characteristics and circumstances dominate the process: The program is fitted to people.

In JOBS, as in most employment and training programs, this dichotomy is not a sharp one. Administrators design programs on the basis of both their clients' needs and their program's overall objectives. Their capacity to individualize program responses is limited, although program services are often adjusted over time on the basis of operational experience. Still, the distinction is important. Assessment approaches that are intended to maximize benefits to clients do not necessarily produce the same decisions as approaches that are intended to maximize program goals.

[7]See Gueron and Pauly, *From Welfare to Work*. An evaluation of different approaches to JOBS, being conducted by MDRC under a contract with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, will compare the effects of up-front job-search models emphasizing labor force attachment and up-front assessment models emphasizing human capital development through education. It will also measure the effects of assessment-based approaches under different circumstances.

Chapter 2

A Framework for Thinking About Assessment

Three considerations inform the discussion of JOBS administrators' choices throughout the remainder of this paper: (1) the goals of JOBS programs, which can vary; (2) the nature of "evidence" about assessment that JOBS administrators might want in order to weigh their choices; and (3) the relationship between assessment and program operations, which is especially critical to administrators because the JOBS law ties program funding to certain program performance standards.

Describing assessment in JOBS, the Family Support Act discusses its purpose rather than details of an assessment process:

> The State agency must make an initial assessment of the educational, child care, and other supportive services needs as well as the skills, prior work experience, and employability of each participant in the program . . . including a review of the family circumstances. The agency may also review the needs of any child of the participant. On the basis of such assessment, the State agency, in consultation with the participant, shall develop an employability plan for the participant. The employability plan shall explain the services that will be provided by the State agency and the activities in which the participant will take part under the program, including child care and other supportive services, shall set forth an employment goal for the participant, and shall, to the maximum extent possible . . . reflect the respective preferences of such participant. The plan must take into account the participant's supportive services needs, available program resources, and local employment opportunities.[8]

Thus, in one program, "assessment" might refer to a quick screening procedure in which participants' recent work experience or high school credentials are compared to the stated eligibility criteria for particular program components. In another program, assessment could be an intensive and lengthy series of counseling sessions in which staff seek to motivate participants, raise their self-esteem, and explore their career options before selecting a program activity.

In the first example, participants might be asked to complete a form that describes their school and work histories, their child care and other supportive-service needs, and their job goals. The process of turning this information into an employability plan and an assignment to a JOBS program component might be as simple as asking participants which activity they prefer. In the second example, several staff members might spend days or weeks with a group of clients gathering information about their capabilities and preferences through discussions, testing, and observation. Case conferences might follow, leading to recommendations that would

[8]P.L. 100-485, Sec. 201(b), creating Sec. 482(b)(1) of the Social Security Act.

be translated into formal contracts between participants and the program.

The basic dimensions of assessment, and how and why these can differ from program to program, are discussed in this chapter.

Ends and Means: The Influence of JOBS Goals on Assessment Approaches

While the intent of the Family Support Act is for states to develop JOBS programs that offer a variety of employment-related services, reach a larger proportion of welfare recipients than in the past, and target resources to the more disadvantaged recipients, the law leaves to states many of the decisions about how to put programs together. It outlines the necessary components of a program, requires certain plans and procedures, and offers funding incentives that are based on standards for participation by eligible individuals and expenditures by states for targeted groups. In response, states are building JOBS programs that emphasize different goals. These include:

- Getting more welfare recipients working;
- Increasing the earnings of welfare recipients;
- Making welfare families better off financially;
- Getting welfare recipients jobs that will move them out of poverty;
- Reducing welfare costs and/or caseloads;
- Saving the government money; and
- Getting long-term recipients into jobs and off welfare.

These objectives lead to different program designs. For example, JOBS programs can stress job-search and job-placement services to move people quickly into jobs (sometimes called "labor force attachment" program models), or longer-term education and training for human capital development. A third alternative is to concentrate services of both kinds on certain groups of welfare recipients. Research to date suggests that some models get more people working, and thus reduce welfare costs, but do not lead to better jobs or improvements for the most disadvantaged groups on welfare; other models increase the income of moderately disadvantaged people who might have gone to work anyway but do not lead to welfare savings. None of the programs tested so far has succeeded in getting significant numbers of welfare recipients out of poverty.[9]

Program design in turn influences assessment. For example, a program aimed at getting long-term recipients into jobs and off welfare may emphasize basic skills education, work experience, and vocational skills training. Such a program needs an assessment system that identifies the long-term welfare group, diagnoses the employability problems characteristic of the group, and matches participants to an appropriate mix of instruction and support. Alternatively, a program aimed at placing more welfare recipients in jobs might require job search as a first step for most of those eligible, with an initial assessment geared to supplying supportive

[9]See Gueron and Pauly, *From Welfare to Work*, p. 36.

services that will enable them to participate in this activity. **In short, assessment systems constitute one means for implementing varying JOBS program models, which in turn are the principal means for achieving varying JOBS goals.**

This leads to an important lesson for JOBS administrators about untangling ends and means: **If the overall objectives and service focus of a JOBS program are not clearly reflected in its assessment procedures, the participation of eligible individuals in specific program components, and the overall flow of clients through JOBS activities, may be quite different from the assumptions of program planners—possibly so different that an unintended program model emerges from assessment practices.** For example, when programs with a goal of immediate employment for the maximum number of welfare recipients include literacy testing in initial assessments, test results often matter most in determining what services are provided first. The programs can end up serving more participants than planned in education components, resulting in an education-focused model. In contrast, programs designed to steer participants with low literacy skills toward education can end up with an employment focus if welfare grants are very low, immediate jobs are a priority, and client preferences weigh heavily in the assessment process.

Evidence About Assessment: What Standards Should JOBS Administrators Apply?

JOBS administrators want to know which assessment approach will increase the effectiveness of their program given their goals, the characteristics of the groups targeted, and local conditions. Some of their other questions about welfare-to-work programs can be answered by findings from evaluations that compare groups of program participants with groups of individuals who have similar characteristics but do not participate.[10] Assessment approaches have not been evaluated by this method, however.

A key reason for this is the difficulty of designing evaluations that can distinguish the results of assessment from the results of services to participants after assessment. Assessment is generally the first in a chain of events expected to culminate in jobs, welfare case closings, or increased income. Consequently, **the contribution that assessment makes to a program's impact on the employment, earnings, welfare status, and other circumstances of participants is difficult to measure, even when a study employs a control group.**[11]

---

[10]Because welfare recipients may find jobs, leave welfare, and experience other changes in their circumstances without participating in employment programs, the groups slated to receive program services and the control groups in such evaluations are often formed through a lottery-like random assignment process that ensures a clear picture of what happens to people under two conditions—when they are eligible for a program and when they are not. See Gueron and Pauly, *From Welfare to Work*, for a review of such evaluations.

[11]An exception to this is when programs place a job-search activity first to "let the labor market decide" whether participants are employable, as many WIN and WIN Demonstration programs operated in the 1980s did. In some of these program models, the service—job-search assistance—and initial employability assessment were considered the same activity.

In the absence of evaluation results, what should JOBS administrators know about assessment approaches to judge their value? Ideally, the answer to one question: **Does assessment increase the ability of program staff to *predict* which eligible individuals will and will not benefit from program services?** If an assessment approach has positive predictive power, then administrators would expect to see high rates of participation in and completion of individual program components. Assuming that the components themselves are well run and well suited to participants, administrators would also expect to see high rates of "success," as defined by the program's overall objectives. At the same time, powerful assessment techniques would not exclude from specific services, or from a program, individuals who could benefit. In short, **effective assessment accurately matches clients to services in two ways: by not referring to a particular service those who are unlikely to benefit from it, and by not failing to refer those who are likely to benefit.**

Judging the predictive power of different assessment approaches is a substantial challenge. "Situational" issues, such as ill health, family problems, and disruptions in child care arrangements, make it difficult for staff to identify the clients who will successfully complete a program activity or find a job.[12] In addition, personal characteristics like motivation, which are very difficult to measure, may have a strong impact on an individual's participation and future employment.

Predictability is also affected by employers' hiring, supervision, and promotion practices. In the chain that leads from assessment to program participation to employment, the employer plays an important role. But people who study employment and training programs and the labor market have not been able to ascertain just who hires whom with much precision.[13] Also, despite a growing body of literature about the basic skills that employers seek, information about the skills needed to enter specific occupations, and about "pre-training" requirements for occupational training, is hard to come by.[14]

If JOBS administrators cannot judge the predictive power of the assessment approaches, they might consider several fallback standards:

---

[12]An evaluation of a voluntary group job-search program for welfare recipients that operated in Louisville, Kentucky, in the late 1970s provided cautionary evidence about narrow targeting policies in such programs. The demonstration program studied was intended to involve a diverse group of welfare recipients (primarily single mothers with school-age children) and screen out only those with the most severe barriers to program participation and eventual employment. While no one who wanted to participate was excluded on the basis of her job-readiness, the program staff were asked to rate the employability of program registrants. The evaluation found little relation between staff ratings and outcomes for program-eligible individuals. Those judged not job-ready were represented among program "no shows," "dropouts," "completers," and "successful job-seekers" in approximately the same proportions. See J. Gould-Stuart, *Welfare Women in a Group Job Search Program* (New York: MDRC, 1982).

[13]See, for example, F. Levy and R. Murnane, "Earnings Levels and Earnings Inequality: A Review of Recent Trends and Proposed Explanations," *Journal of Economic Literature*, forthcoming.

[14]See R. Yudd and D. Nightingale, *The Availability of Information for Defining and Assessing Basic Skills Required for Specific Occupations*, Urban Institute Policy Memorandum (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, May 1990).

1. **Do formal assessment approaches provide program staff and participants with information that they understand, value, and use in making choices about services?** If JOBS program staff say they don't use the information they receive from outside assessment agencies or it does not add to their ability to help clients choose, its value for them is questionable. Participants in the same program, however, might learn more about their abilities, in a more acceptable way, through formal assessment activities than through meetings with staff.

2. **Does assessment lead to targeted groups receiving the services intended?** Assessment methods should serve the ends of the program by identifying targeted groups and getting individuals in these groups the services intended for them. If assessment is effective by this standard, JOBS administrators would expect to see high rates of enrollment in the program for target-group members. Further, if program plans specify particular services for subgroups among those targeted, members would be accurately sorted into the appropriate service components.

3. **Does assessment increase the consistency of program decisions about "who goes where"?** Administrators are often interested in ensuring that different staff members follow the same procedures and make similar decisions under similar conditions. If an assessment technique yields consistent results, administrators would expect to see that individuals with similar characteristics receive similar services in their programs. This helps ensure that service providers get the types of clients for whom their programs are presumably most effective.

4. **Does assessment change the nature of decisions that program staff make about "who goes where"?** In other words, does the introduction of a particular assessment approach make a difference—any difference at all—in program operations? JOBS administrators should try to answer this question when they introduce new assessment approaches that are more complex, more expensive, and/or more time-consuming than previous practices.

Operational Considerations in Choosing Assessment Approaches

Although it may be difficult for JOBS administrators to judge whether and how much assessment improves the effectiveness of their programs, at a minimum, assessment should not hinder program operations. Assessment is a hindrance if it substantially reduces program participation or the funds available for program services, or if it creates conflicts between the agency that enrolls participants and assigns them to JOBS activities and the agencies that deliver services. Operational issues are discussed in detail in Chapter 8, but three points illustrate their role in a framework for thinking about assessment:

1. *Lowered participation in JOBS programs.* **Assessment is the gatekeeper that gives or withholds access to other program components. Thus, the time and effort involved in assessment will affect how quickly individuals participate after they become eligible for JOBS and the proportion who eventually**

participate. Lengthy assessments that require several meetings between clients and staff lead to higher dropout rates than simpler assessments. Some programs that offer extensive career exploration activities, or that schedule a battery of tests early on, report high dropout rates or frequent interruptions in attendance during assessment. Further, initial assessments that involve more than one agency "lose" more participants than those requiring only one stop. On the other hand, quick assessments do not guarantee higher participation rates. If JOBS program enrollees are steered toward activities they are not prepared to perform adequately, or they are not interested in, dropping out can still be a problem.

2. ***Inter-agency conflicts.*** In JOBS programs, the welfare agency is responsible for setting and implementing policy on "who goes where." But most JOBS components are operated by other organizations, often for nonwelfare populations as well. **These service providers have entry criteria that are intended to admit participants who can succeed *by their standards, based on their experience,* and to screen out participants who are likely to fail. When the JOBS assessment process does not take these entry criteria into account, the result can be inter-agency conflicts over which participants should be served in which components. Participants who are referred and then rejected may be lost to the program.**

3. ***Resource constraints.*** Many things determine the cost of assessment to JOBS programs, including the number of people assessed, how much and what type of testing is done, and how much time staff take to do the assessment and develop an employability plan. Testing forms, scoring sheets, and computer devices available commercially are additional program expenses if JOBS administrators choose a test-based approach, as are the staff training, facilities, and equipment needed to use them. **If JOBS administrators have limited funds for assessment, they need to consider approaches from a fiscal perspective.**

Dimensions of Assessment: How Approaches Vary

What Is Assessed: Broad Areas and Specifics

Although the term "assessment" is often used as though it referred to a single data-gathering and decision-making process, an employability assessment can encompass many topics. These may be addressed in more or less depth, in different sequences, and at different points in time. Among the broad areas on which an assessment might focus are participants' (1) potential for immediate employment, or job-readiness; (2) basic literacy skills;[15] (3) vocational skills, aptitudes, and interests; and (4) supportive-service needs, including, if JOBS officials choose, a review of the needs of participants' children, which could affect their employability.

Within these broad categories, what administrators deem relevant to an employability assessment will vary widely. In JOBS programs that emphasize

[15]The terms "basic literacy skills," "literacy skills," and "basic skills" are used interchangeably in this paper.

immediate employment and are operated in areas with low unemployment rates and numerous employers, initial assessments may be limited to a review of participants' health and child care needs. In contrast, programs focused on getting participants into jobs that will provide stability, fringe benefits, and a good income, or those operated in more difficult economic environments, may include a review of participants' work histories and their reasons for leaving previous jobs.

Assessments of basic literacy skills can include math, reading, or both, and these can be broken down into computation, problem-solving, comprehension of prose, interpretation of documents, and English-language fluency. Similarly, explorations of participants' vocational skills, aptitudes, and interests can cover a wide range of occupations or be limited to occupations in which training is available locally, jobs are projected to increase, or entry wages are high enough to support a family.

Although this paper focuses on assessing the characteristics of JOBS participants, other factors will also influence the impact of programs, such as the demands and expectations of local employers, job availability, the entry requirements of training vendors, and the availability of child care and other supportive services in the community.

When Assessment Is Conducted: Sequencing and Staging

The order in which an assessment addresses employability topics depends on priorities. For example, JOBS programs that place priority on getting welfare recipients into the labor force may first explore participants' work experience, their desire to work, and opportunities in the local job market. Programs that emphasize education as the route to self-sufficiency may start with a test of basic literacy skills, steering those with low scores to literacy programs and delaying assessment of long-term vocational goals. Other programs may delve deeply into all aspects of participants' employability before formulating an initial plan. In such an assessment, school experiences, literacy skills, work experience, vocational goals, vocational aptitudes, knowledge of the world of work, attitudes toward work, and job-search skills may receive equal attention.

JOBS administrators can also choose different assessment sequences over the course of a multi-stage program. Although the wording of the JOBS law implies that a range of topics must be covered at least broadly in an initial assessment, in-depth assessment strategies can be introduced later. Obviously, when some topics are explored in more depth at later program stages, participants who leave welfare after an initial activity will not receive as extensive an assessment as those who stay longer.

How Information Is Gathered

Many different data-collection instruments and methods can be used to evaluate participants' skills and needs in each of the four areas described above. Standardized tests are typically used to assess literacy skills and vocational aptitude, but there are also other methods of collecting this information, such as interviewing participants, asking them to demonstrate their literacy by filling out forms, and reviewing their school records. In some programs, staff members observe

participants in workshops or simulated work settings to determine their job-readiness.

The extent to which participants' preferences are explored depends partly on the instrument chosen. As noted above, staff may simply ask participants about the occupations, training courses, or program activities they prefer. Or they may offer formal or informal education and counseling—limited or extensive—before making an assignment.

Who Is Assessed

Assessment procedures may vary by participant subgroup if program services are intended to vary. In a JOBS program that provides only work experience or education for the principal wage-earners in two-parent AFDC households (usually men), the assessment process needed to choose between these activities may be different from (and simpler than) one designed for single mothers. Similarly, because the JOBS legislation specifies education as the primary service for teenage AFDC parents who have not finished high school, assessment for this population may have a different emphasis and sequence than assessment for adults.

Assessment Decisions: Making Assignments to JOBS Activities

The criteria that a JOBS staff member uses to assign a person to an activity or component after assessment may be formal, as when objective participant characteristics point to a particular service component. Or they may be general guidelines, allowing staff and participants flexibility to choose services on a case-by-case basis. Formal criteria can set minimum entry standards, as by requiring participants to have at least a seventh-grade reading level to enter vocational training, or they can focus on participant characteristics, as by identifying all those with reading skills below the ninth-grade level, who might then be assigned to an education activity. A combination of the two strategies is also possible: using minimum entry criteria for some JOBS components and mandating participation in designated activities for individuals with certain characteristics. Assignment criteria can also be devised to match participants with certain demonstrated competencies or behaviors to JOBS activities. For example, regular attendance in a short pre-employment or job-readiness course may be made a prerequisite for entry into a long-term training program.

Using any of these approaches entails several levels of decision-making. First, program staff may decide (with participants, in some cases) on the general type of activity that seems appropriate, such as education, vocational training, job clubs, on-the-job training (OJT), or work experience. Next, if there are options, a specific course, vendor, or placement may be selected. At yet another level, staff may need to decide about the appropriate hourly or weekly schedules for participation and the fit between a participant's program assignment and her supportive-service needs.

Costs of Assessment

As more topics are covered in great depth, more extensive information-gathering methods are prescribed, and more time-consuming procedures are employed for matching participants to services, JOBS assessment becomes more expensive. The

range of possible costs is very wide: from less than $50 per participant to hundreds of dollars.

Theoretically, investments in assessment can improve the cost-effectiveness of JOBS programs by targeting employment-related services to the participants who will benefit most from them. There may be a point, however, beyond which additional funds expended do not improve the fit between participants and programs. Because assessment is sometimes in direct competition for JOBS funds with case management and employment-related activities, program administrators designing assessment systems must consider the possibility of diminishing returns.

There is limited research evidence to guide JOBS administrators on trade-offs between investing in assessment and investing in other JOBS activities, but strategies vary according to program goals:

- Programs that focus on immediate employment, provide up-front job search, and are designed to reach a broad segment of the eligible population typically make minimum investments in assessment at first, reserving in-depth assessments for participants who fail to find a job.
- Programs that provide relatively expensive services for a selected segment of the eligible population typically invest more in assessment, seeking to ensure that participants have the prerequisite skills to complete training and are motivated to do so.
- Programs that offer a mix of services typically screen participants first for basic literacy skills. Additional assessment is minimal for some participants and considerable for others, depending on their characteristics or on the types of services being considered.

Staging assessment procedures is one way to achieve a mix of assessment expenditures for different participants. Another is to match the intensity (or cost) of assessment to the intensity (or cost) of employment-related services: High-cost assessment strategies might be reserved for making decisions about assigning participants to high-cost services (such as education or training), and less costly strategies might be used for assigning individuals to low-cost services (such as job search or work experience).

Local Variation

From the state perspective, another dimension of JOBS assessment is local variation: State JOBS administrators must decide whether all local JOBS programs should use similar assessment instruments and decision-making methods for activity assignments. While standardization may benefit program planning, there are also reasons to allow local variation. For example, if JOBS program designs differ from locality to locality, perhaps assessment practices that fit program designs should vary as well. Local assessment practices and instruments might be expected to differ even when the basic program components and the flow of participants through a sequence of JOBS activities are similar—for example, when JOBS programs use service providers with varying entry requirements. Differences in labor markets are another reason to adapt assessment practices to local conditions.

Summary: An Assessment Framework

Each dimension of assessment described above encompasses a set of choices for JOBS administrators. Based on the selections they make, administrators can design assessment systems that are more or less intensive, lengthy, comprehensive, and uniform. Table 1 summarizes their choices in four major assessment areas (listed in the first column): job-readiness (immediate employability), basic literacy skills, vocational aptitudes and interests, and supportive-service needs. In the other columns, each entry next to a bullet (•) represents a possible feature of an assessment system. JOBS administrators can "mix and match" these features, structuring an assessment in the way that makes most sense for their programs.

While many combinations of assessment features are theoretically possible, they tend to occur in constellations associated with a few basic JOBS program designs. Assessments designed to evaluate all areas of all participants' employability upon program entry, using standardized tests and other staff-intensive data-collection strategies, are found in a type of program that is sometimes called (not surprisingly) an up-front assessment model. In another basic program type, called up-front education, initial assessments focus on basic literacy skills. In these two models, participants' potential for immediate employment is a second-order question, usually explored if they have completed high school or a GED (General Educational Development, or high school equivalency) program, passed a literacy test, or do not want more schooling. Another approach, called up-front job search, puts an assessment of immediate employability, or job-readiness, first. Figure 1 displays these three models.

Programs that offer a fixed sequence or a very limited choice of initial activities—as in the up-front education or up-front job-search models—are likely to:

- Make initial assignments on the basis of whether participants' objective characteristics match specific criteria;
- Involve participants relatively little in the decision-making process; and
- Stage assessments to give more attention and choice to participants who have completed an initial program component and are eligible for a greater range of activities.

Programs that offer participants a wide range of activities when they enter JOBS—as in the up-front assessment model—are likely to:

- Include tests for vocational aptitudes and basic literacy skills in an initial assessment; and
- Give both staff and participants more discretion in choosing program activities.

TABLE 1
JOBS ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

Assessment Area	Specific Participant Characteristics Assessed	Information-Gathering Strategies	Subgroups Assessed	Time of Assessment	Program Assignments Considered
Job-readiness (immediate employability)	• Prior work experience • Basic literacy skills • Current job skills • Vocational interests	• Self-reported information from participant (checklist or interview) • Basic literacy assessment • Vocational assessment • Staff interviews with participant's previous employers	• All program-eligibles • High school graduates (or those with a GED) • Participants over compulsory school-attendance age • AFDC-UP case heads (heads of two-parent families receiving AFDC) • Participants interested in immediate employment	• At program entry • After completion of: Job-readiness training Basic education Vocational training Work experience Other • After failure to attend program component	• Job placement • Assisted job search (individual or group) • Independent job search • Job-readiness training

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Assessment Area	Specific Participant Characteristics Assessed	Information-Gathering Strategies	Subgroups Assessed	Time of Assessment	Program Assignments Considered
Basic literacy skills	• Prior education and degrees earned • Basic literacy skills	• Self-reported information from participant (checklist or interview) • Short standardized test • Long standardized test • Analysis of participant's writing samples	• All program-eligibles • Non-high school graduates (or those without a GED) • Participants who complete job search without finding employment • Participants interested in education	• At program entry • After completion of: Job-readiness training Job search Work experience Career exploration	• Adult basic education program • GED program • English as a second language program

(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

Assessment Area	Specific Participant Characteristics Assessed	Information-Gathering Strategies	Subgroups Assessed	Time of Assessment	Program Assignments Considered
Vocational aptitudes and interests	• Vocational skills and aptitudes • Vocational interests and goals • Knowledge of world of work and job-search techniques	• Self-reported information from participant (checklist or interview) • Short screening test • Standardized tests (pencil and paper or computerized) • Standardized tests (work station) • Interest inventories • Personality tests • Career exploration activities	• All program-eligibles • Participants with basic literacy skills • Participants who complete job search without finding employment • Participants interested in job training or post-secondary education, or in occupation for which training/post-secondary education is available and necessary, and for which jobs are available	• At program entry • After completion of: Career exploration Job-readiness training Job search Basic education Work experience Other	• Vocational training • Post-secondary education • On-the-job training • Work experience

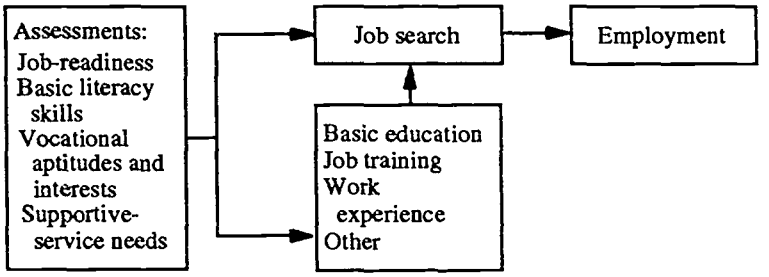
(continued)

TABLE 1 (continued)

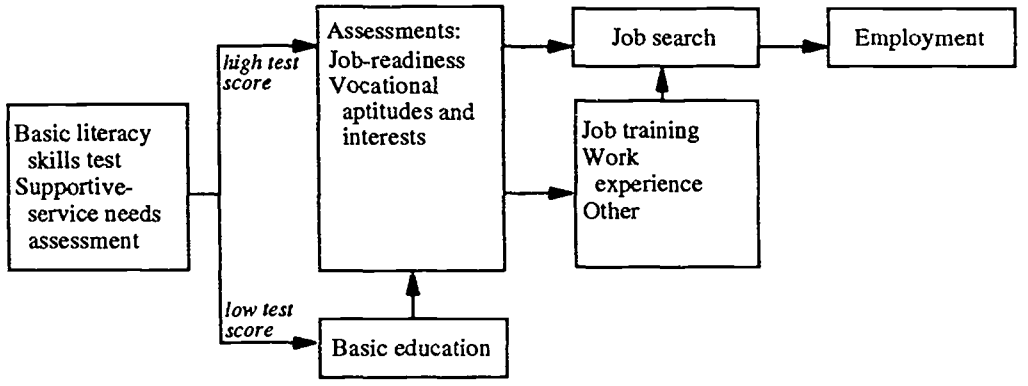
Assessment Area	Specific Participant Characteristics Assessed	Information-Gathering Strategies	Subgroups Assessed	Time of Assessment	Program Assignments Considered
Supportive-service needs	Needs of parent: • Child care • Transportation • Legal • Housing • Health	Needs of parent: • Self-reported information from participant (checklist or interview) • Home visits • Monitoring of attendance and behavior at program activities • Staff interviews with participant's previous supportive-service providers	• All program-eligibles • Participants who indicate they have supportive-service needs	• At program entry • After completion of assessment for component assignment • Upon report of program attendance problem	• Child care • Transportation assistance (payments) • Other
	Needs of children: • Health • Education • Family functioning	Needs of children: • Self-reported information from participant (checklist or interview) • Home visits • On-site observation of children in child care • Staff interviews with teachers • School records or test results			

FIGURE 1
THREE PROGRAM MODELS

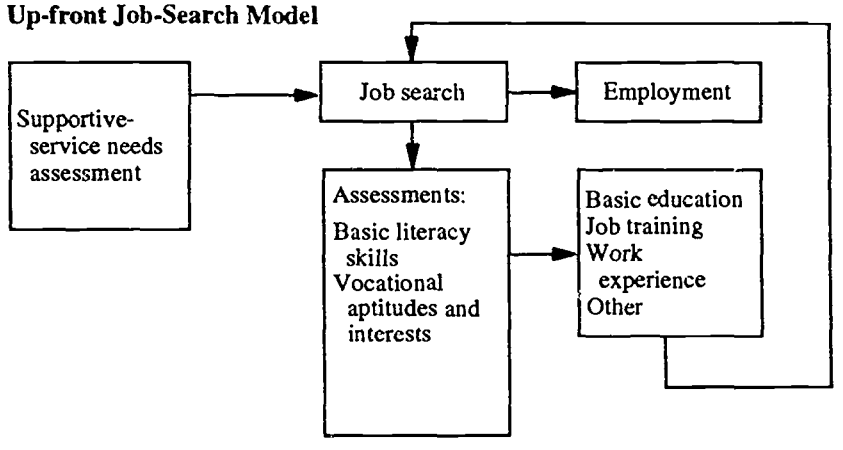
Up-front Assessment Model



Up-front Education Model



Up-front Job-Search Model



Chapter 3

Assessing Job-Readiness

Avoiding long-term welfare dependency is the goal of the Family Support Act reforms, and "work, child support, and family benefits" are cited in the act's statement of purpose as the means to achieve this. Lawmakers and JOBS program administrators have different visions of how much work, at what wages, with what initial investments in education and training can and should be expected of welfare recipients, however. JOBS programs across the country reflect these differences. **Early assessments of participants' job-readiness, or potential for immediate employment, are central to two types of JOBS programs: (1) those that give high priority to increasing the number of welfare recipients who go to work, and (2) those that operate within severe resource constraints.** Some participants require less costly program assistance to find work than others; thus, the ability to distinguish those with the potential for immediate employment from those who require longer-term services in order to get a job theoretically enables programs to target their resources efficiently. When the allocation of scarce program resources is an important concern, JOBS administrators may seek to use the assessment process to identify participants who need little assistance in finding employment, in order to reserve resources for those who need more.

JOBS administrators face a challenge in formulating a distinction between these two groups that can be translated into effective program responses. **While job-readiness can be defined to be consistent with a range of program goals, deciding on an appropriate program service for a job-ready group is not easy. The usual services provided to "job-ready" participants in welfare-to-work programs of the past—job-search assistance or job-placement activities—do not necessarily benefit job-ready program participants.**

Defining Job-Readiness

Wage goals for JOBS participants are a major determinant of who is judged job-ready. In one program, job-readiness may be defined as the ability to obtain a job that produces no net loss of cash income,[16] whereas in another it may mean the ability to obtain a job that makes a family substantially better off than it is on welfare. In some programs, a participant is considered job-ready if she can work at *any* job, including one that reduces her AFDC grant but does not result in closing her welfare case. Of course, the variation across states in AFDC grant amounts and wages for entry-level work has a sizable effect on the welfare-versus-work equation. In a low-grant state, minimum-wage jobs can increase net income, whereas in a high-grant state, welfare recipients may have to earn almost twice the minimum wage to be disqualified from AFDC.

[16]JOBS program regulations state that participants who would experience a net loss of cash income have "good cause" for refusing to accept a job. See 45 CFR 250.35(c).

Assessments of immediate employability can also be designed to give the greatest weight to participants' preferences. If a participant *wants* to work, she may be judged job-ready regardless of her education, previous work experience, or other characteristics.

Definitions of job-readiness also hinge on how much assistance is available for those in need of the fewest services. Job-placement or job-search components can be more or less structured and involve more or less instruction and support. In some cases, job-ready individuals are referred to a U.S. Employment Service agency or directed to conduct an independent job search without any initial JOBS service. Program administrators may also prefer immediate employment for some individuals as a method of developing skills and work habits. For instance, a participant may combine part-time employment with welfare receipt and part-time education or training. In some programs, staff may not be asked to judge job-readiness at all: If JOBS administrators believe that the workings of the labor market are the best indicator of job-readiness, they may rely on up-front job search to reveal which participants can find work.

A Job-Readiness Paradox: Who Benefits from Job Search?

JOBS programs that strive for accuracy in assessing job-readiness by one standard—correctly predicting who can go to work with minimal assistance—may undermine their achievements by another standard—making a difference through program services for JOBS participants. This paradox stems from two facts. First, as noted above, job-search assistance—frequently intensive, although lasting only a few weeks—has been the usual service provided by welfare employment programs to participants considered job-ready. Second, programs featuring job-search assistance have not made a difference in the employment, earnings, or welfare receipt of the most job-ready participants, typically, first-time AFDC applicants with recent work experience. A more disadvantaged group of welfare recipients benefited from these programs, and the experiences of control group members in evaluations indicate that the job-ready participants would have gone to work even without help from the programs studied.[17]

It is difficult to know, without comparison studies, whether the job-search assistance offered in programs of the 1980s was too much, too little, or not the right kind of service for people with recent work experience.[18] However, the research findings suggest that predicting whether someone has the potential for immediate employment is not the same as predicting whether someone will go to work *as a result* of job-search assistance.

This distinction leads to a choice for JOBS administrators between defining job-readiness on the basis of the potential to get a job or the potential to benefit from

[17]See Gueron and Pauly, *From Welfare to Work*.

[18]Studies of individual and group job-search programs operated under different conditions in Louisville, Kentucky, from late 1978 through mid-1981 suggest that the effects of the two approaches are similar. See C. Wolfhagen and B. Goldman, *Job Search Strategies: Lessons from the Louisville WIN Laboratory* (New York: MDRC, 1983).

job-search assistance. If they define job-readiness narrowly—for example, as having the credentials, experience, and personal goals associated with high rates of job-finding—a critical program design question follows: whether to include or exclude this group from job-search services, or even to limit such services to participants who meet this definition. An alternative is to define job-readiness broadly and include some people with less apparent employability potential who might be able to find work with the help of job-search services.

Assessing Job-Readiness When Indicators Are Not Clear-Cut

The factors that might be considered in a definition of job-readiness include:

- **Participants' previous work experience**, including:
  - Wages, stability of employment, reasons for leaving, type of work, and job performance
  - Availability of similar jobs in the local labor market
  - Stability of similar jobs and opportunities for upward mobility
- **Participants' preferences**, including:
  - Type of job or occupational choice
  - Working conditions and schedule
  - Education or training as an alternative to work or in combination with work
- **Participants' education levels and basic literacy skills**, including:
  - High school diploma or GED certificate
  - Highest grade completed
  - English-language proficiency
  - Minimum proficiency for types of jobs available or desired
  - Previous job training
- **Participants' income needs**, including:
  - Earnings needed to "break even" compared to existing benefits
  - Earnings combined with AFDC needed to exceed the AFDC grant
  - Amount that would provide a substantial net increase over the total welfare-related benefit package
- **The program's job-finding services**, including:
  - Individual job search with no instruction or support
  - Job clubs with instruction and support
  - Job placement (e.g., referrals to job openings)

It is relatively easy to make decisions about participants' potential for immediate employment when all the job-readiness factors considered point in the same direction. Usually they do not. **Participants whose potential for immediate employment is uncertain**—and who *might* fail to get a job as a result of an employment search, or who *might* fail to keep a job and return to welfare, or who *might* only be able to get a job that provides the same income as welfare—**are the**

ones for whom questions of program goals and philosophy most influence assessment decisions. For example:

- Is it a policy to reserve scarce program resources for participants who are most likely to stay on welfare a long time? If so, then broader definitions of job-readiness, leading to more participants being judged job-ready and referred to job search or job placement, might be adopted.
- Does the program have enough alternatives to job search or job placement to accommodate all those judged not immediately employable? If not, a broader definition of job-readiness might be indicated.
- Is reducing welfare expenditures a higher or lower priority than increasing the earnings or net income of welfare recipients? Because these two goals suggest different program models, job-readiness definitions and decisions may be geared to different services. Typically, programs aimed at reducing welfare costs assign individuals with a wide range of characteristics to job-search/job-placement activities, whereas programs aimed at increasing participants' income assign more individuals initially to education, job training, or other "human capital development" activities.
- Is short-term job-holding considered a step into the world of work, or a "failure" experience? Employment and training professionals disagree about the value of entry-level jobs that pay low wages, do not offer fringe benefits, lack career opportunities, or are seasonal. In programs that give priority to holding *any* job, definitions of job-readiness are usually broad and the risk of failure is downplayed.
- How much weight is given to participants' preferences? If the answer to this question is "a great deal," program staff who are uncertain about a participant's job-readiness may rely on her interest in trying job search/job placement or another job-preparation activity.

Key Issues

Research suggests that there is a trade-off between maximizing immediate job placements and maximizing program impacts (the difference that a program makes for participants). Therefore, program administrators should define job-readiness to fit their program goals. For example, **if JOBS programs adopt a relatively narrow definition of job-readiness, the group of individuals so designated will be small but the rate of job-finding among them will likely be high; however, a narrow definition of job-readiness will exclude some more disadvantaged individuals who could also go to work with minimal assistance. Conversely, a broad definition of job-readiness will create a larger group to be given assistance, but the rate of job-finding will be lower.**

Definitions of job-readiness will also have a major impact on program flow and resource allocation. The more broadly the term is defined, the greater the proportion of the caseload that will usually be assigned first to job-search or job-placement activities, which are typically among the least expensive program services on a per participant basis. If employability is narrowly defined, a larger proportion of participants will usually be assigned to activities such as education and training that entail a greater investment of time and resources per participant.

In choosing assessment approaches, JOBS administrators should consider whether their program objectives point to a broader or narrower definition of job-readiness, for example:

Important Program Goal	*Definition of Job-Readiness*
Maximizing the number of participants who find immediate employment	Broad
Maximizing welfare savings	Broad
Maximizing the rate of job entry for participants in a job-search activity	Narrow
Making substantial investments in human capital development	Narrow
Reserving expensive services for those who cannot go to work without them	Broad
Providing education and training services to all participants who could benefit from them	Narrow
Maximizing client and caseworker choice	Broad

Chapter 4

Assessing Basic Literacy Skills

Concerns about the increased likelihood of long-term welfare dependency among young mothers who are high school dropouts, as well as about a mismatch between the skills that workers entering the labor market have and those that employers need, have prompted many JOBS administrators to emphasize basic skills education in their programs. The objective of these programs is first to improve basic skills among welfare recipients and then to turn education gains into increased earnings and self-sufficiency.

Provisions of the Family Support Act mandating education as a JOBS activity for some segments of the welfare population give a central role to literacy assessment. The JOBS legislation specifies that if individuals age 20 or over are required to participate, and they do not have a high school diploma or equivalency degree, their employability plans must include an education activity, unless these participants have attained a basic literacy level or their long-term employment goals do not require a high school degree.[19] Basic literacy is defined in the program's implementation regulations as functioning at least at an 8.9-grade level.[20] The law also stipulates that, to the extent permitted by resources, states must require AFDC custodial parents under age 20 who do not have a high school diploma or GED to participate in an appropriate education activity, regardless of the age of their children.[21]

Standardized tests designed to measure reading and math skills are widely available and are often scored in relation to school grade levels, thus simplifying this assessment task in JOBS. However, the relationship between basic skills and job performance is poorly understood, and there is considerable uncertainty about the most appropriate ways to measure the kinds of basic skills that are required on the job. **As a result, it is relatively easy to measure JOBS participants' basic literacy, but difficult to decide on an effective program response to grade-equivalent literacy results.**

JOBS administrators making decisions in this area must first confront the dilemma discussed above: Should the objectives and designs of JOBS programs drive assessment, or should assessment findings drive program designs? When basic skills testing in JOBS is a universal and early step, the results tend to push programs toward large-scale remediation efforts. This is because, while most women on welfare have completed high school or received a GED, most score well below national averages on basic skills tests.[22] Large-scale remediation efforts may not serve the goals of JOBS in some states and localities. Administrators need to examine the

---

[19]See Sec. 482(d)(2) of the Social Security Act.

[20]See 45 CFR 250.1. In this context, grade 8.9 means the ninth month of the eighth grade.

[21]See Sec. 402(a)(19) of the Social Security Act.

[22]See N. Zill et al., *Welfare Mothers as Potential Employees: A Statistical Profile Based on National Survey Data* (Washington, D.C.: Child Trends, Inc., February 25, 1991).

capacity of local education providers to help welfare recipients improve their skills, complete education programs, and go to work before addressing specific literacy assessment questions such as: Are standardized tests necessary? Should tests be given to all or only some participants? Should literacy testing be a first step in a JOBS program?

Using Standardized Tests

Information about participants' education history—the highest grade completed and whether they received a high school diploma or passed the GED test—is the foundation for a literacy or basic skills assessment. High school graduation or GED attainment is a prerequisite for many jobs, and studies show that individuals with these credentials earn more than individuals who lack them.[23] However, high school graduates may still be deficient in the reading and math competencies required on the job, especially if they have been out of school and out of the labor force for some time. Among people whose principal language is not English, basic skills in English may also be inadequate for employment regardless of education level. Therefore, JOBS programs need methods of assessing basic skills beyond ascertaining the number of years participants spent in school, certainly for the segment of the welfare population without high school diplomas and perhaps for high school graduates as well. Increasingly, standardized tests are that method.

Several types of standardized tests are widely used for measuring the basic literacy skills of welfare recipients. One type is academically oriented, measuring the reading, math, and other skills that are traditionally taught and evaluated in elementary and secondary schools, and producing test scores that can be interpreted (with caution) as reflecting school grade-level equivalents.[24] These tests focus on general academic knowledge such as spelling, identifying the main idea in a reading passage, grammar, computation, and arithmetic word problems. Most of these tests are described as "norm-referenced," because they measure an individual's skills in relation to those of a specified group of representative individuals (e.g., a

---

[23]See G. Berlin and A. Sum, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families, and Our Economic Future*, Occasional Paper No. 3, Ford Foundation Project on Social Welfare and the American Future (New York: The Ford Foundation, 1988). For a comparison of the economic consequences of GED certification and high school graduation, see S. Cameron and J. Heckman, "The Nonequivalence of High School Equivalents," Working Paper No. 3804 (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1991).

[24]Many experts regard grade-level equivalents as a poor and inappropriate measure of achievement among adults, because most adults—whatever their reading and math achievement levels—know a great deal that elementary and secondary students do not. In addition, the basic skills requirements of most jobs do not correspond to the achievement levels of elementary and secondary students, so grade-level equivalents are not well suited to assessing job-readiness. However, grade equivalents have attained wide currency in popular discussions of literacy. Like any scale, grade-equivalent results make it possible to distinguish higher and lower achievement levels and to recognize extremes. See R. Linn, "Quantitative Methods in Research on Teaching," in M. Wittrock, ed., *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 98-99; and I. Kirsch and A. Jungeblut, *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults*, Final Report (Princeton, N.J.: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1986), pp. V-10 and 11.

nationwide sample of adults or a nationwide sample of youths in school). Grade-equivalent scores are an example of norm-referenced scoring.

Tests of this type are the TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education), ABLE (Adult Basic Learning Exam), and WRAT (Wide Range Achievement Test). All use a multiple-choice format. The ABLE incorporates some life skills questions, but the emphasis is on academic skills.[25]

A second type of test, developed more recently, is designed to measure basic literacy skills needed in adult life and in the workplace, rather than in a traditional school setting. Although their developers say these tests measure "workplace literacy" or "functional competencies," it is not known whether the test items represent a valid sampling of the literacy tasks encountered by adults. Some are norm-referenced; others are described as "criterion-referenced," because they measure an individual's performance against a set standard (a "criterion") rather than against the scores of previous test-takers.

Two widely cited examples of such tests are the California Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) and the Tests of Applied Literacy Skills (TALS) developed by the Educational Testing Service. CASAS tests, prepared with the help of a consortium of education agencies in California, are used in adult education, welfare, and other employment and training programs in 25 states. (Outside California, they are not always called CASAS tests.) The TALS was designed to provide information about adults similar to that provided by the National Assessment of Educational Progress of American Youth, which was conducted in 1985, and the National Adult Literacy Survey planned for 1992.

CASAS tests are varied and can be adapted for specific program applications. One version, the GAIN Appraisal (used in California), is a 50-minute multiple-choice test that measures reading and math skills. CASAS also includes listening comprehension tests for those with poor English skills and a series of achievement tests intended to measure progress in adult education programs.

The TALS differs from CASAS tests in that it asks questions that require a brief written response (often "fill in the blank") rather than using a multiple-choice format. In addition, the battery includes tests that assess "prose literacy" (the ability to read and interpret information in newspapers, magazines, and books); "document literacy" (the ability to identify and use information in application forms, tables, charts, indexes, and the like); and "quantitative literacy" (the ability to perform numerical operations on information contained in printed materials).

Comparisons between the academic tests and functional tests are difficult. Academic tests have been used longer and more widely to measure the literacy of adults. Anecdotal reports suggest that functional competency tests are more likely to be accepted by adults, but none of the tests cited here has been validated as a predictor of job performance or employability.[26]

---

[25]See G. Jackson, *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs* (Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Tests, Measurement, and Evaluation, 1990). This document provides concise descriptions of a large number of tests that may be considered for use in JOBS programs, including their administration requirements.

[26]See Jackson, *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs*.

Guidelines for Selecting Standardized Literacy Tests

Standardized literacy tests come in many formats and lengths and have varying purposes and administration requirements. For JOBS program administrators who decide to use a test, the options are narrowed by three main considerations.

1. **It is practical to choose a test that is relatively short, is easy to administer and score, and meets recognized standards of technical soundness.** In general, the TABE, ABLE, WRAT, CASAS, and TALS meet these criteria. A short test is preferable to a long one if the assessment is intended to determine only general achievement level. For more precise diagnostic purposes, a longer, more detailed test is required. A number of programs use the TABE "locator" test, which takes about 20 minutes to administer, or only the reading and math portions of the TABE (instead of all seven subtests, which take a total of 4½ hours to administer). California's Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) Program uses the 50-minute CASAS appraisal test, which measures reading and math skills, as an initial literacy screen, rather than the longer CASAS achievement tests. The lengthier versions of the TABE and CASAS might be used to pinpoint specific weaknesses and strengths after a participant has entered an education program.

2. **Literacy tests should be well matched to the general purpose of the JOBS program and the assessment process.** For example, because academically oriented tests contain items that resemble those in the entry tests used by providers of education and job-training services, and to a lesser degree resemble items on the GED test, they may be the best tool for assessing literacy in programs that refer participants to providers that require specific test scores for entry or emphasize GED attainment. It may also be useful to administer the GED practice test to determine which participants are good candidates for GED instruction. However, such tests may not be useful for programs that focus on immediate employment. For example, the TABE's use of items that require the correct use of the apostrophe points to a level of grammatical sophistication that is not relevant to a wide range of jobs.

3. **Selecting tests that will be accepted by education and training providers in JOBS will help smooth operations.** Multi-agency employment and training programs in some locations are plagued by a "retesting" phenomenon, which can be wasteful—both of resources and the enthusiasm of participants. JOBS administrators should find out how local education and training providers assess basic literacy. They may be able to develop interagency agreements on testing and referral criteria to minimize the retesting problem. Such agreements might cover which agency will test JOBS participants, which instruments will be used, and the test scores that are acceptable for entry into specific program activities.

Alternative Literacy Assessment Strategies

States have considerable flexibility in deciding whether to use a standardized test or some other method to decide which participants need education and what type. The JOBS legislation and regulations do not require testing as an assessment strategy, although the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' preamble to the regulations recommends that, "where appropriate," states use "nationally recognized, standardized, or industry-developed tests to determine literacy levels and aptitude skills before assigning participants to specific educational and vocational training programs."[27] While some states administer standardized achievement tests to all eligible program participants, others test only some participants, and still others rely primarily on the highest school grade that participants completed to judge literacy. In lieu of testing, some programs have participants fill out a work history form or other questionnaire as part of the JOBS intake/orientation process. According to staff who use this technique, it provides an excellent indication of how well participants read, write, spell, use grammar, answer questions, and follow instructions.

Such informal demonstrations of literacy skills can be supplemented by interviews in which staff ask questions about the type of reading participants do at home or on a job. Similar informal approaches can be devised to judge participants' fluency in English—for example, on the basis of their work history, their employers' references, and their ability to converse in English during interviews, read and answer questions about program-related materials, or fill out forms.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Standardized Tests and Alternative Strategies

Most standardized tests are easy to administer. They can be given in a group setting, are not very costly, and can be taken and scored quickly. In addition, the tests cited above (with the exception of the TALS, which has not yet been widely used) meet recognized standards of technical soundness and are accepted or used by many employment and training, adult education, and welfare employment programs.[28]

However, experts uniformly warn against using a single test as the *sole* basis for screening participants for services. They emphasize the importance of other factors (such as the individual's employment goal, education background, and motivation) in making such decisions. One analyst of basic skills testing for employability has warned:

> In studies of the predictive validity of the most widely used basic skills test, the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), it was found that of those that military selection policies had predicted to fail in job training and on the job, eight of the ten actually performed satisfactorily. These data, for an organization that has

[27]See *Federal Register*, vol. 54, no. 197, October 13, 1989, p. 42178.
[28]See Jackson, *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs.*

studied this type of assessment for seventy years at a cost of at least $100 million, should caution the "gatekeeping" use of basic skills tests in workfare/welfare programs, workplace literacy, and JTPA programs.[29]

While tests measuring functional literacy *should* be better predictors of employability-related basic skills than those that measure academic skills, no research has demonstrated whether this is true or false.[30]

Many assessment experts and program operators also warn about the "test anxiety" that formal testing creates in some people. They believe that requiring a test or a battery of tests at the beginning of a program can have a negative effect on participants who associate testing with past failures and unpleasant experiences in school. Testing may dampen enthusiasm for the program and affect participation rates. (One assessment specialist argues, however, that such concerns are exaggerated, and that not only testing itself but early testing in an unfamiliar, impersonal environment accounts for the problem.[31]) To reduce test anxiety, experts recommend several strategies: delay testing until after participants have had a chance to accustom themselves to the program environment; assure participants that tests are intended not to screen people out of services but to identify the best way for the program to help them; use a short test rather than a long one; and ensure that staff members who administer tests establish rapport with the clients before giving the test instructions. One program even gives clients "stress management" training before administering a standardized test of basic skills.

Informal assessment strategies have their own advantages and disadvantages. They may reduce or eliminate test anxiety, but their results are imprecise and more subjective than standardized test scores, partly because there is no clear reference group against which performance can be evaluated.

Informal strategies may work best when a literacy assessment is intended to identify people who cannot read or write English, but they cannot pinpoint the 8.9-grade level specified in the JOBS regulations as the standard for basic literacy, nor are they able to identify people who are likely to pass the GED test with a modest amount of instruction. JOBS administrators should also take into account whether the education and training providers they work with consider informal assessments reliable. In many programs, these providers want evidence of literacy skills consistent with their entry standards. However, if JOBS participants who are referred to education and training providers would be retested anyway, an informal assessment might be a useful screening strategy for the JOBS program and more cost-efficient than administering a formal test.

The answers to the three key questions identified above—Are standardized tests necessary? Should tests be given to all or only some participants? Should literacy testing be a first step in a JOBS program?—depend on the specific program model

---

[29]T. Sticht, *Testing and Assessment in Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language Programs* (San Diego: Applied Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Inc., January 1990), p. 24.

[30]Sticht, *Testing and Assessment*, p. 25.

[31]Telephone interview with Lori Strumpf, Director, Center for Remediation Design, Washington, D.C.

adopted and on the entry requirements for program components. **Universal, up-front, standardized testing of basic literacy skills in JOBS might make sense for programs that emphasize education and job training rather than immediate employment, and that rely on providers of these services that set entry standards based on test scores.** But the cautions against this practice noted above—e.g., test scores tend to be given more weight in decisions about services than is justified by their predictive capabilities—still apply. **This method of assessment may not make sense for programs that emphasize immediate employment or that rely on providers of education and training services that administer their own tests before admitting anyone to their programs.**

Education Program Responses to Test Scores

Many adult education programs use basic skills test scores to identify the type of education program an individual should enter. For example, individuals who read above the eighth-grade level are often assigned to courses that prepare them for a high school equivalency degree (GED classes); those reading between the fourth- and eighth-grade levels are often assigned to adult basic education (ABE) classes, which are geared toward improving basic reading and math skills; those who test below the fourth-grade level are assigned to basic literacy classes, which focus on reading and vocabulary building. Individuals with a very limited command of English are referred to English as a second language (ESL) classes. In some states, the law bars large vocational-technical education centers from accepting people whose test scores fall below specified levels (usually eighth-grade).

While these are common standards for making decisions about what kind of education program is appropriate for people with poor basic skills, JOBS administrators also face fundamental questions about how much education to provide for whom and whether participants with poor skills should be excluded from other activities, including job search. Data on completion rates for GED and ABE programs are sketchy, but JOBS staff across the country report that high proportions of participants drop out of these programs or stay enrolled for long periods without making progress.[32]

Recent amendments to the Adult Education Act, the federal government's primary authority for supporting adult literacy programs, require the U.S. Department of Education to develop indicators of program quality for adult education programs, including whether they are successful in recruiting, retaining, and improving the literacy skills of participants. Until the results are in from this long-term project to

[32]G. Jackson reports ABE program attrition rates of 39 to 80 percent in *ACBE Evaluations of Community Based Literacy Programs (1988-89)* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Community Based Education, 1989), p. 84. See also T. Herr and R. Halpern, *Changing What Counts: Re-Thinking the Journey Out of Welfare* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, April 1991), pp. 15-16. These authors, who are conducting a long-term evaluation of Project Match, which serves very disadvantaged Chicago welfare recipients, question education as a first step, even for those with low basic skills, due to a high dropout rate in their program among women attending GED classes.

establish performance standards in adult education, and from evaluations that measure the employment-related payoffs of basic skills education, JOBS administrators must set their own expectations for adult education for welfare recipients. At this time, there is a risk that assessment approaches premised on education for low-skilled participants will inadvertently contribute to poor program participation and outcomes, and possibly to low or nonexistent program impacts as well.

Key Issues

A central question for JOBS administrators about the design of a basic literacy assessment is: **Should standardized tests be used?** Related questions include when a literacy assessment should be done—i.e., at what point in a participant's program experience—and whether it should vary for different groups of participants.

The principal advantages of using standardized tests for assessing basic literacy skills in JOBS include:

- They are a widely available, relatively low-cost method of determining approximate levels of reading and math abilities, and they are valid and reliable when properly administered—i.e., they do measure the targeted basic skills, and they produce the same results time after time.
- They are widely used to "sort" individuals into different education and training programs and are an established screening mechanism required by many education and training programs.

Major disadvantages include:

- They have the potential for reducing program participation by creating "test anxiety" among participants.
- There is no proven correlation between the skills measured and job performance, even for tests that are designed to assess "functional" skills.
- They can screen participants out of possibly beneficial activities if used as the sole indicator of an individual's capabilities in conjunction with strictly applied standards for entry into education activities.

Less formal methods of assessing literacy skills present a trade-off as well. Talking to program staff and filling out program forms may be less anxiety-producing for participants than taking a test, but it is difficult to diagnose specific skill deficits or ascertain a precise grade-level equivalent of skills without a test.

A question closely related to methods of literacy assessment is: **What are appropriate program responses to JOBS participants with poor basic skills?** High dropout rates for adult basic education and GED programs should cause administrators to reconsider universal, up-front testing for basic skills as an approach to deciding who needs education and who does not.

Chapter 5

Assessing Vocational Skills, Aptitudes, and Interests

Vocational assessments serve three main purposes in JOBS: (1) to identify occupations that participants are interested in and generally suited for; (2) to assess their general readiness for occupation-specific training; and (3) to guide choices about the specific type of occupational training appropriate for them. If participants are not considered immediately employable and their basic skills are in the middle range or above (equivalent to about seventh grade or above), the likeliest JOBS assignments include: vocational training programs, pre-vocational education programs, post-secondary education programs, on-the-job training (OJT) or work experience placements, and career or vocational exploration activities.

Designing a vocational assessment in JOBS is more complicated than designing a literacy assessment. The range of topics that can be covered is much greater, and many strategies are available for gathering information and using it to make decisions about program assignments. Like educational testing, vocational assessment is a thriving commercial enterprise with competing ideas and products. (In neither educational testing nor vocational assessment, however, is the market crowded with products or experts specialized for disadvantaged individuals.) Therefore, it is not surprising that, in practice, there is considerable variation in how welfare-to-work programs and other employment and training programs handle vocational assessments, or that there is little agreement about how comprehensive the process needs to be and where it fits in the overall program flow.

The available vocational assessment systems or "technologies" are not clearly related to actual job performance. Thus, a key question for JOBS administrators in choosing vocational assessment approaches is whether the more complex and expensive systems offer additional benefits to staff and participants. If such systems are adopted, **another question is whether vocational assessments should be conducted for all, or only some, participants.**

Vocational Assessment Topics and Information-Gathering Strategies

The kinds of information generally considered relevant in making referrals for vocational training, OJT and work experience placements, and other vocational activities include:

- Literacy skills and prior education
- Prior work history
- Occupational interests and goals
- Knowledge of different occupations and workplace environments
- Job attitudes and work behaviors
- Knowledge of job-search skills and strategies
- Vocational aptitudes

Some of this information comes from employability and literacy assessments rather than, strictly speaking, vocational assessment. An important question for JOBS administrators, then, is how to consolidate information gathered at different times or from assessments done by different agencies. Unless JOBS assessment systems are structured so that a vocational assessment incorporates the results of any prior literacy assessment, a participant can end up taking at least three different basic skills tests in a JOBS program: one at program entry to determine whether she should be assigned to an education activity; one (or more) administered by the education provider to measure her progress through its program; and one administered by the vocational training provider to determine whether she meets literacy requirements for entry to training. Such a system wastes resources and risks losing participants because extra steps—which can look like barriers—are created in the program.

Occupational Interests and Goals

The different strategies used in employment and training programs to identify participants' occupational interests and goals reflect the varying philosophies about the decision-making process and the amount of knowledge necessary to make an informed decision. At the most intensive end of the spectrum are approaches that provide a structured vocational exploration before an employability plan is developed. Vocational exploration activities may include:

- Guided research by participants on wage rates, workplace conditions, and skill and training requirements in different occupations;
- Visits to work sites to see work conditions firsthand and talk to employees and their supervisors;
- Presentations by employers and workers (including former program enrollees) with opportunities for discussion;
- Hands-on demonstrations of workplace tools and procedures;
- Computation of family budgets based on different wage levels;
- Instruction and practice in job-search techniques;
- Discussion of appropriate work behaviors; and
- Vocational counseling.

Vocational exploration approaches generally encourage participants to take an active role in acquiring information about themselves and the job world. Also common are individual and group exercises that help participants realistically appraise their interests and options and make decisions about their career goals. The intent of vocational exploration is usually to "empower" participants to take responsibility for their employment plans and program assignments. Proponents of this approach argue that it increases the likelihood that participants will complete a training or education course and remain employed, because they are more

committed to their *own* (rather than program staff's) choices and to preparing for jobs that suit their economic needs, temperament, and interests.[33]

Such an approach was followed in a recent pilot program in New York City. The Employability Skills Project (ESP) enrolled welfare recipients in a course designed to teach them employability skills and the principles of self-directed career decision-making while they were active in other employment-related activities such as work experience and vocational training, or before they were assigned to an activity. The ESP course used the Career Development Series of the Adkins Life Skills Program, a curriculum designed to teach disadvantaged groups the attitudes, knowledge, and skills they need to choose an occupation and find and hold a job. It is based on a problem-solving approach and uses interactive exercises, role-playing, and video materials. ESP had multiple objectives: to help participants take positive, self-directed steps toward employment; to facilitate sound vocational choices; and to increase retention in training courses by building commitment and validating the participant's occupational choice. According to the pilot program researchers, the program was successful in increasing participants' attendance and retention in training as well as their job-placement rates.[34]

Another approach to assessing occupational goals and interests tests a participant's responses to verbal descriptions or pictorial representations of a variety of work settings or work situations, using questionnaires called "interest inventories." Typically, the test-taker indicates whether she would like, dislike, or is unsure about working in such conditions. The U.S. Employment Service has developed such an instrument; examples of commercially developed inventories include the Career Occupational Preference Survey and the Jackson Vocational Interest Survey.

A simple approach relies on participants' expressed preferences for certain types of jobs. Often, although not always, programs in which staff have high caseloads use participants' occupational or training choices as the main guide to vocational activity assignments, as long as their education, work history, and basic skills levels suggest that they can meet entry requirements established by local training providers. Programs that subscribe to the "empowerment" philosophy may also give great weight to client preferences in vocational assessment decisions; their guiding principle is "Let them try it out."

In programs that neither conduct formal testing to identify job interests nor provide a structured career exploration unit, one-on-one interviews are usually the main method of vocational assessment. A typical interview takes 45 minutes to 1½ hours, covers all the topics listed above for vocational assessment, and results in an employability plan. Such an approach relies more on what participants already know about job opportunities and careers than do formal approaches that include tests.

---

[33]Telephone interviews with Cynthia Morano, Executive Director, Wider Opportunities for Women, Washington, D.C., and John Doerrer, Senior Vice President, Training Development Corporation, Bangor, Maine.

[34]M. Bridges et al., *Employability Skills Project: A Life Skills Approach to Making Welfare Work* (New York: New York City Department of General Services, August 1988).

Vocational Aptitudes

A longstanding interest among employment and training professionals in improving retention and completion rates in vocational training courses, and retention in employment, has stimulated an aptitude assessment industry. Two types of instruments have been developed. One assesses job-related skills through pencil-and-paper tests supplemented with a few tests using physical apparatus. The other type measures job-related aptitudes in terms of an individual's performance on "work samples" or at "work stations" that simulate a work environment. Comprehensive assessment systems using computerized analysis combine the two approaches.

As an aspect of vocational assessment, aptitude testing has not played a prominent role in JOBS programs, although it remains central to vocational rehabilitation programs and is prominent in the JTPA system. One of the key issues for JOBS administrators is evidence: Few relationships between the aptitudes measured and actual job performance have been demonstrated through research that controls for background differences among the people studied. Furthermore, the interpretation of aptitude test results is a special area of expertise not always found in employment and training programs, and converting test results into decisions about appropriate local vocational training, work experience, and other services requires the judgment of knowledgeable staff.

Pencil-and-Paper Tests. The GATB (General Aptitude Test Battery), developed by the U.S. Employment Service in 1947 and revised in 1983, is one of the most widely used vocational aptitude tests for employment counseling and referral. The test, which takes 2½ hours to administer, measures nine traits: intelligence, verbal aptitude, numerical aptitude, spatial aptitude, form perception, clerical perception, motor coordination, finger dexterity, and manual dexterity. Most of these are tested with pencil and paper; a few require the manipulation of physical apparatus, for example, inserting pegs into holes or assembling and disassembling small washers and rivets on a board.

The skills analysis for the GATB is based on the U.S. Department of Labor's *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* (DOT), which is a widely used tool for matching workers with jobs.[35] The most recent version of the DOT classifies 12,000 jobs according to a scheme of broadly defined performance requirements.

In 1986, the U.S. Employment Service announced plans to make the GATB the sole basis for job referrals from that agency and to expand the range of jobs for which it was considered a valid predictor of success—from the original 500 to virtually all occupations in the U.S. economy. The announcement prompted legal challenges, followed by a full-scale review of the test by a committee of experts appointed by the National Academy of Sciences. A U.S. Department of Labor policy suspended use of the GATB as the sole basis for screening and referrals to

[35]J. Hartigan and A. Wigdor, eds., *Fairness in Employment Testing: Validity Generalization, Minority Issues, and the General Aptitude Test Battery* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989), pp. 60, 63, and 135.

employers by the U.S. Employment Service. (It may still be used for Employment Service counseling on a voluntary basis.)

The results of the study should serve as a caution to organizations considering using this test and similar tests in their JOBS assessment. The judgment of the expert panel was that "GATB scores can provide useful screening information, but the predictive power of the test battery is not so strong that the GATB should become the sole means of filling all job orders."[36] The committee also warned that the proposed referral policy would have the effect of reducing opportunities for minorities because the test would screen out a large proportion of minority job applicants who would be capable of performing well on the job. The panel's technical review was also skeptical of claims about the generalizability of the test results to the full range of occupations in the economy; they advised caution in applying the test results beyond the original range of occupations for which it was developed.[37]

Tests that are similar to the GATB and widely used include the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), the Differential Aptitude Test, the Employee Aptitude Survey, and the Wonderlic Personnel Test. The panel that studied the GATB rated it against these other tests and found that they offered little, if any, improvement over the GATB in their ability to predict success in training.[38]

Work Station Testing. "Work station" or "work sample" tests are alternatives to pencil-and-paper testing methods. Initially developed for programs serving the mentally or physically handicapped, they were adapted for economically and culturally disadvantaged individuals in the 1960s. Under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Labor, the Jewish Employment and Vocational Services (JEVS) of Philadelphia pioneered these testing methods in programs for the disadvantaged. The most recent JEVS product is known commercially as VITAS (Vocational Interest, Temperament, and Aptitude System). It includes 21 work samples, in each of which the participant performs a task similar to some aspect of a job. The range of work samples, which takes 2½ days to administer, includes clerical, mechanical, technical, and physical tasks that are considered to be related to thousands of job listings in the DOT. The speed and accuracy of the work performed determine a person's score.

VITAS also provides information on individuals' vocational interests and temperamental suitability for certain types of jobs. The test-taker's reactions to the work samples, based on behavior during the test and on a personal interview, are the measures of vocational interests. "Work-related temperaments"—such as a tolerance for repetitive tasks, an ability to plan and organize, and an ability to cooperate with others—are judged by an evaluator who observes the testing process. An assessment report synthesizes the results of the work sample tests and observations, and identifies job classifications in the DOT and the U.S. Department

[36]Hartigan and Wigdor, p. 5; see also Chapter 8.
[37]Hartigan and Wigdor, p. 8 and Chapters 6 and 7.
[38]Hartigan and Wigdor, pp. 91-98.

of Labor's *Guide for Occupational Exploration* for which the participant has demonstrated potential.

The developers of work station tests have traditionally claimed two main advantages of this type of assessment: It is useful for populations that cannot read well enough to take traditional pencil-and-paper tests, and it is not likely to generate the same type of test anxiety as a written test. The testing equipment is expensive, though, and a limited number of participants can be accommodated at one time.

Comprehensive Vocational Assessment Systems. Some commercially developed assessment instruments use computer systems to integrate the information-gathering and decision-making functions in a vocational assessment. Typically, they offer a battery of tests of vocational aptitude, occupational interests, and basic literacy skills. In addition to the individual's scores on each test, the computer-generated evaluation report provides a vocational profile of the individual. It recommends specific training or jobs that seem appropriate by matching a test-taker's results to databases containing information about occupation-specific competency requirements.

Another JEVS product, APTICOM, is a widely used example of this approach. The vocational aptitudes section of APTICOM contains 11 tests measuring 10 aptitudes; it closely resembles the design and format of the GATB. The occupational interest inventory section uses the 12 interest areas defined in the *Guide for Occupational Exploration* and is derived from the interest inventory instrument developed by the U.S. Employment Service. Test-takers indicate whether they like or dislike descriptions of work tasks and environments, or if they are undecided. The academic skills section measures language and math ability based on the scales of the GED test.

The entire battery takes between 1½ and 2 hours to administer, considerably less time than the longer versions of the tests from which it is derived. Because it is computer-based, results are available almost immediately. The final report, in addition to including scores on the individual tests, identifies occupational groups and examples of specific jobs (based on DOT listings) that are believed by APTICOM's developers to be appropriate for the test-taker.

The technical soundness of the APTICOM battery has been rated as good as or better than that of the longer tests.[39] However, the ability of the APTICOM system itself to predict training outcomes or on-the-job performance has not been tested. Also, because it uses GED-like items, APTICOM is more academic in tone than CASAS tests or the TALS. The system is designed to reduce the anxiety and boredom associated with the more traditional tests, but whether it does this remains to be determined with certainty.

KEVAS and JOBTAP are other commercially developed, computer-based tests that automatically process information about an individual's vocational aptitudes, interests, and academic skills to predict her success in specified types of occupational training. KEVAS (Key Educational Vocational Assessment System),

[39]Karl F. Botterbusch, "Vocational Assessment and Evaluation Systems: A Comparison," reprinted in Vocational Research Institute marketing materials.

developed by Key Education, Inc., in Shrewsbury, New Jersey, includes tests that measure perceptual and motor skills, abstract reasoning and problem-solving ability, vocational interests, "temperament factors" considered important to job performance (social functioning, response to stress, work attitudes), and reading and math skills. Background and demographic characteristics of test-takers are collected in a structured interview and entered into the automated system by program staff. The KEVAS database also includes an "occupational bank" containing over 600 occupational profiles developed from the DOT and other sources. Test results and background information are matched by computer to the occupational profiles in order to generate recommendations for occupations with skill requirements that are in keeping with a participant's tested capabilities and interests. The computer-produced KEVAS evaluation report also makes recommendations for skills and attitudinal areas that need improvement. The KEVAS battery takes about 2½ hours to administer.

JOBTAP (Job Training Assessment Program), an automated assessment tool for vocational education and training programs for the disadvantaged, takes a somewhat different approach. Developed by the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, it is designed to help service providers determine who among the applicants to their programs would be most likely to succeed in the available training courses, as well as to help individuals find appropriate services. JOBTAP includes checklists for an individual's vocational interests and work history, and tests a spectrum of work skills and job-related basic skills. The computer-generated report evaluates the individual's performance against a nationally representative group, produces a measure of her likelihood of success in the type of training offered by the provider, and makes recommendations for a short-term career goal, training program, and long-term career goal. By comparing the scores of all applicants to the same training courses, training providers can determine who are most likely to succeed.

Workplace Knowledge and Job-Search Skills

Although participants' understanding of workplace attitudes and behaviors and of job-search techniques are often assessed as part of a review of their job-readiness, some program administrators believe that participants can be better advised about the type of vocational training they should enter if these traits are considered in vocational assessments as well. Tests have been developed for this purpose. PAYES, the Program for Assessing Youth Employment Skills, also developed by the Educational Testing Service, is specifically for young adults and youths with low verbal skills. This three-part test measures understanding of acceptable work behavior, attitudes toward supervision, and self-confidence; knowledge of different types of jobs, job-search skills, and ability to follow directions; and interest in different occupations. PAYES takes about 75 minutes to administer. This type of assessment is currently a major focus in the JTPA system, since youth participants in JTPA programs must demonstrate "pre-employment" competencies in these areas.

Personality Tests

Personality tests are often used with the intention of measuring an individual's level of self-esteem. They may also provide information about how the test-taker views her interactions with others. In these tests, individuals respond to statements or questions about traits or behaviors, indicating whether they are accurate descriptions of themselves. Personality tests that have been used in welfare-to-work or employment and training programs or are generally considered to be of a high technical quality are: the Jackson Personality Inventory (JPI), the California Psychological Inventory (CPI), the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI), and the Culture-Free Self Esteem Inventories. It should be noted, however, that such tests generate hostility and anxiety in some test-takers.[40]

Critics of personality tests generally believe that they do not accurately predict success on the job and may be culturally biased, personally intrusive, or conducive to negative stereotyping. Supporters say that they provide insight into traits that affect how participants relate to coworkers, supervisors, and different work situations.

Considerations in Designing a JOBS Vocational Assessment

JOBS administrators who decide to invest significant sums of money and time in vocational testing expect the resulting program assignments to be better than if participants and staff simply used their own experience and common sense, perhaps guided by some broad criteria. They also do not want to "reinvent the wheel." Employment and training professionals have been updating and refining their knowledge of occupational skills for decades, and an extensive literature addresses the relevant issues in labor supply and demand. However, **the relationship between the measurable characteristics of disadvantaged individuals and their performance in vocational training programs is unknown. Furthermore, the relationship between vocational training and success in the job market has not been rigorously measured.** The evidence that *is* available about the effectiveness of some programs (not including vocational training, for the most part) has not been integrated with available knowledge about targeting program services to certain groups; therefore, a picture of what works best for whom cannot be drawn for disadvantaged individuals.[41] Existing information about targeting services to groups of clients

[40]Jackson, *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs.*

[41]For a discussion of the problems in comparing the effects of programs targeted to different groups of welfare recipients, see Gueron and Pauly, *From Welfare to Work.* An evaluation now under way of employment and training services provided to low-income adults and youths through the JTPA system—sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor—promises to expand considerably the evidence available about the effects of vocational training for specified groups of the eligible population, including welfare recipients.

consists largely of descriptions of entry requirements, sometimes accompanied by outcome data.[42]

For JOBS administrators, this means that practical considerations may be most important in their decisions about vocational assessment. As in other areas of JOBS assessment, there are trade-offs. For example, on a fixed budget, JOBS programs may not be able to afford in-depth vocational assessments for all participants. Administrators may need to choose between providing simple assessments for all participants and extensive assessments for some—perhaps done after some participants have been assigned to other activities or left the welfare rolls for work. They may opt to conduct vocational assessments only for participants whose initial screening shows that they are eligible for selected vocational training programs, in order to document skills required for entry to certain vendors' programs. Or they may target vocational assessments to participants who are uncertain about their vocational goals and are assigned to a vocational exploration activity. Some program administrators employ vocational assessments primarily as an educational tool for participants, recognizing that their predictive power is limited.

[42]See Yudd and Nightingale, *The Availability of Information for Defining and Assessing Basic Skills Required for Specific Occupations.*

Key Issues

A critical question in designing a vocational assessment for JOBS is: **Do the specialized tests available improve the ability of staff and participants to make appropriate choices about program activities enough to warrant the additional expense and time that they require?**

There is little evidence from research to answer this question, and only very limited information to indicate whether such tests can accurately predict who will be successful in training or on the job. What is clear from an expert review of the General Aptitude Test Battery (GATB), widely used in vocational assessments, is that there are significant concerns about using this test, as well as similar tests, as the sole basis for determining whether job applicants can perform adequately on the job. People who score low are frequently able to perform jobs they would have been excluded from on the basis of the test.

Operational experience with vocational assessment approaches is mixed. Some staff and programs respond enthusiastically to specialized testing strategies, while others question the value of specific types of tests—in particular, interest inventories and personality tests. Thus, important considerations for JOBS administrators are:

- Whether vocational assessment is related to local training options and job opportunities. If the latter are limited, the value of extensive vocational testing is questionable; similarly, computer-based assessment systems that recommend occupational options not locally available are not helpful to participants and may waste resources.
- Whether, to conserve resources, it is better to cover some vocational topics early and—for those who need it—other topics later, instead of scheduling all participants for a comprehensive, intensive assessment when they enter the JOBS program.
- Whether to integrate some parts of a vocational assessment into other JOBS activities—for example, into vocational exploration, training programs for workplace attitudes and behavior, and job-search workshops.
- Whether to require consistent assessment procedures across a state or to allow localities flexibility in selecting the agency responsible for assessment and the specific strategies and instruments used—based on variations in local service provider practices and labor markets, for example.
- Whether to establish specific criteria for referring participants for in-depth assessments or job training, or to encourage case-by-case decision-making on the basis of staff and participant choices.

Chapter 6

Assessing Social Service Needs

The purpose of a social service needs assessment in a welfare-to-work program has traditionally been to identify personal, family, or situational problems that could interfere with a participant's attendance in program activities, job retention or performance, or potential for self-sufficiency. Such assessments have usually focused on transportation and child care arrangements, participants' physical and emotional health, and housing and legal problems. In JOBS, this area of assessment combines traditional social work practice with the program's employment focus, as was the case in the earlier Work Incentive (WIN) Program.

The JOBS legislation breaks new ground, however, by giving states the option of also assessing the needs of children when program staff review family situations that might affect the parent's (generally the mother's) program participation or employability. This provision has the potential to greatly expand the role of the JOBS agency in identifying and addressing the social service needs of welfare families,[43] although there is little operational experience—and even less research evidence—to guide agencies in this area.

The key question for most JOBS administrators in designing social service assessments is whether to go beyond existing approaches—i.e., to also identify the needs of participants' children, as the law now allows, and to respond to the needs of participants and their children with social services—rather than emphasize policies that excuse those with personal problems from participation in employment services. Advocates of "doing more" point to the multiple problems of the most disadvantaged welfare recipients and the reduced life chances of their children, arguing that employment services alone are unlikely to be the answer to poverty.[44]

Problem Identification

The methods used to gather information in social service needs assessments may determine how often, when, and what types of personal problems are identified among participants in JOBS programs. These methods range from a checklist of self-reported information to home visits. One assessment instrument developed for a welfare employment demonstration program included a checklist covering eight areas—child care, transportation, housing, drug and alcohol problems, personal attributes (such as attitude, appearance, and behavior), legal problems, health, and

---

[43]See O. Golden et al., *Welfare Reform and Poor Children: Collaboration and Case Management Approaches*, draft (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government, September 1990); and S. Smith, S. Blank, and R. Collins, *Pathways to Self-Sufficiency for Two Generations: Designing Welfare-to-Work Programs That Strengthen Families and Benefit Children* (New York: Foundation for Child Development, 1992).

[44]See Smith, Blank, and Collins, *Pathways to Self-Sufficiency for Two Generations*, and Zill et al., *Welfare Mothers as Potential Employees*.

language barriers—and some questions to help staff to identify whether a problem existed.[45] Based on the client's response, a program staff member indicated on the assessment form whether a problem existed, whether it was severe enough to be a barrier to participation, and whether there might be a problem in the near future. The checklist was designed to be completed in 10 minutes.

An alternative method is assessment of social service needs by direct observation. Some programs conduct lengthy, in-depth assessments requiring several days or weeks of activities in order to observe participants firsthand. Staff members look at patterns of attendance, behavior, and attitudes to identify underlying problems that may need to be addressed before participants enter a program component.[46] Staff members in some programs may visit parents and children at home or observe children in a child care center. (Both of these methods of assessment are rare,[47] and the latter tends to be done only if the program itself provides on-site child care.)

More common than checklists, in-depth assessments, or home visits are problem identification approaches that rely on initial interviews or direct observation of clients in their first program activity. The extent of such assessments differs depending on whether interviewers probe and explore the information provided by participants. For example, when inquiring about a participant's child care arrangements, an interviewer can explore her preferences and concerns, educate her about different types of care, and discuss the options that might be most suitable for her and her child. Current practice also varies depending on:

1. ***The responses available.*** Where services for some common but difficult social problems are scarce—such as slots in treatment programs for substance abuse and assistance with housing relocation or costs—programs may identify but not explore these needs. Participants with these problems may be routinely excused from participation. Where JOBS programs cooperate with service organizations that can respond to needs that extend beyond income and employment, there is a higher probability that JOBS staff will attempt to uncover these needs.

2. ***The resources available for assessment.*** Where the number of assessment staff, their time, or program funds are limited, JOBS programs may rely on participants to identify their own needs. They may also adopt an "exception" strategy of exploring social service needs if participants fail to attend assigned activities. Where program intake is slow enough, assessment caseloads are low enough, or special assessment services can be purchased easily, JOBS programs may adopt an intensive assessment approach that includes a study of family and children's needs.

---

[45]The instrument was developed by the Urban Institute for the Pennsylvania Saturation Work Program. For a discussion, see D. Nightingale, *Assessing the Employability of Welfare Clients* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, May 1986).

[46]Two programs that conduct such assessments are operated by Wider Opportunities for Women in Washington, D.C., and the Training Development Corporation in Bangor, Maine. See below for further descriptions of these programs.

[47]See Golden et al., *Welfare Reform and Poor Children.*

3. ***The philosophy of the program.*** Programs that emphasize labor force attachment may give information about the social services available and expect participants to identify their own needs. Programs that aim to maximize participation sometimes take this approach as well, in order to avoid focusing on reasons that eligible individuals may have *not* to participate. A program that emphasizes human capital development, and has staff trained in human behavior, is more likely to assess individual and family functioning as an initial step.

Responses to Social Service Needs

In the past, there have been three main responses in welfare employment programs if staff uncovered problems or situations likely to interfere with an individual's ability to participate in the program or take and keep a job:

1. If a parent had a problem covered by standards for exemption from participation in the program, she could simply be excused, or she could be referred to a social service provider. Under JOBS, these are still possible responses.

2. If the parent had "good cause" for not participating, according to state or local program policies, she could be excused until the problems were resolved. This entailed additional decisions about how long such a "deferral" was to last; what, if any, services were to be provided in the interim; and who would provide the services. Under JOBS, this is also a possible response.

3. If the parent neither met exemption criteria nor had "good cause" for nonparticipation, but the family's or her problems were nevertheless likely to make participation in the program or holding a job difficult, welfare employment programs of the past usually had few responses. They could arrange and/or pay for child care and transportation, provide individual counseling, make referrals to social service agencies, or make payments for "special needs." Under JOBS, the program can meet social service needs either directly or in coordination with other agencies. The family problems and the service responses are not specified by the law.

In setting policy and developing criteria and procedures for assessment of the social service needs of JOBS participants (but not their children), JOBS administrators have extensive experience to draw on from WIN and WIN Demonstration programs. JOBS does not use either the formal designation of "deferral" for eligible (nonexempt) welfare recipients who are temporarily unable to participate, or the "appraisals" of social service needs that were central to the WIN program registration process. There are similar practices in JOBS, though; many programs have modified "front-end" WIN appraisal methods to fit new JOBS terminology and assessment procedures.

Thus, in some JOBS programs, acceptable reasons for deferring participants from program activities have been established. Staff members review these with each participant during an initial interview and make referrals or arrangements for social services on a case-by-case basis. In other programs, participants are informed about program activities in a group orientation, and they meet with a staff member for

discussion of their social service needs only if they identify circumstances that would hinder their program attendance. Some JOBS programs have established standard social service "packages" for participants, often including vouchers for child care (which participants find themselves, guided in many locations by child care resource and referral agencies, or lists of child care providers from JOBS staff) and transportation allowances. These services are sometimes supplemented by others, including funds for special needs that participants and staff identify during assessments.

Assessments of JOBS participants' social service needs that go beyond child care and transportation are likely to uncover problems that traditionally have not been a focus of welfare-to-work programs. Because the needs of children are inextricably linked to those of their parents, the new options in JOBS can be interpreted as a broad opportunity to identify and respond to problems like parental substance abuse, domestic violence, and poor parenting behavior, as well as to children's physical health and development. JOBS administrators need to consider whether to devote program resources to these needs, either directly or through agreements with service providers.

If JOBS programs rely primarily on referrals to other organizations for social services, the referral process may need attention. For example, will staff members simply inform participants about the availability of services and let them make their own arrangements, or will they actively negotiate services for individual JOBS participants? Will they follow up with participants and agencies? Will they intervene in certain circumstances?

The Timing of Social Service Assessments

The employability characteristics of JOBS participants and their vocational aptitudes and interests tend to change slowly (if at all) as an individual progresses through a program. Social service needs are more dynamic. Because circumstances change, arrangements break down, and unforeseen difficulties emerge, social service assessment or monitoring capability generally needs to be available continuously, not just when initial program assignment decisions are made. This requires communication between the JOBS staff responsible for seeing that such needs are met and staff in charge of the activities in which participants are enrolled, if these responsibilities are separate. In JOBS programs that provide case management, the case manager can monitor both clients' social service needs and their participation in employment-related activities. Thus, social service assessment intersects with the broader issues of case management, client activity tracking, and inter-agency communication.

Frequent contact between case managers or other program staff and participants to continually monitor their social service needs also has a particular advantage: Because the circumstances addressed in a social service needs assessment are sometimes highly personal, developing participants' trust in staff is essential, a process that often takes time and continuity of relationships.

Key Issues

Welfare-to-work programs have rarely had the capability to address the social service needs of welfare families beyond the supports required for clients to participate in employment-preparation activities, such as child care and transportation. The JOBS legislation gives states the option of assessing the needs of children in families with adults eligible for JOBS programs, which opens up new opportunities and challenges for program planners. Little research and few models are available to guide decisions in this area.

Topics of interest to JOBS officials include:

- ***Methods of problem identification.*** Simple checklists that rely on participants to flag their own concerns, interviews of varying intensity, observations of participants in program activities and of their children in child care, and home visits can be used to evaluate child and family functioning. As in educational and vocational testing and assessment, there are few social service assessment tools that reliably predict how well children or families will fare if they receive a particular type of service or no service. Thus, JOBS administrators may want to develop strategies to screen and prioritize families for intensive social service assessment. In the same way that intensive vocational assessments in JOBS might be reserved for participants being considered for costly vocational training, intensive social service assessments might be reserved for families being considered for costly social service interventions.

- ***Responses to social service needs.*** In the past, welfare employment programs usually deferred or exempted a large proportion of theoretically eligible individuals because of temporary or long-term "barriers to employment." JOBS programs are permitted to provide a wide range of social services to eligible adults and their children to improve families' prospects of self-sufficiency, although so far this seems to consist mainly of referrals to existing social service programs. JOBS assessment staff may need to expand the types of problems they screen for to include all those for which the program or locality has a service response.

- ***Targeting and staging assessments.*** Like assessments of job-readiness, basic literacy skills, and vocational interests and aptitudes, assessments of JOBS participants' social service needs can be designed to vary by subgroup within the eligible population. High-risk groups—for example, teenage mothers—might be targeted for more intensive social service evaluations. However, unlike other types of assessment that are intended primarily to lead to assignment to a JOBS component, assessment of social service needs is an ongoing process. Problems can emerge at any time that have the potential for interfering with program participation or employment.

Chapter 7

Program Examples: Variations in Assessment Strategies

The welfare employment programs of the 1980s illustrate many of the approaches to assessment that JOBS administrators can adopt, as well as the ways that program objectives and designs interact with assessment. In programs that emphasized staff and client choice, or employed experienced vocational counselors, determinations of immediate employability were usually made on a case-by-case basis, using subjective criteria such as a participant's motivation and preferences as well as more objective ones such as work experience and education level.[48] In these programs, staff knowledge of the local labor market and their accumulated experience working with welfare recipients allowed them to judge the employability of individual clients. Even in programs that prescribed services on the basis of participants' characteristics or circumstances, staff discretion and program philosophy played an influential role in determining "who went where."

In the **Baltimore Options Program**, which was designed to serve 1,000 WIN-eligible clients at a time and operated between 1982 and 1986, there were general guidelines for "who should go where," but particular decisions depended a great deal on what participants wanted to do, and on whether staff thought they would benefit from the service option they selected. The program offered participants a range of activities when they enrolled. Staff relied on the results of a one-hour test of reading and math skills, information from forms on which participants recorded their prior education and work history, and a 45- to 90-minute interview during which participants' interests, goals, family situations, and supportive-service needs were discussed. Participants who wanted vocational training and met the education criteria for entry were referred to training vendors. Any additional vocational assessment was done by these vendors. Overall, this relatively unstructured assessment approach resulted in approximately 25 percent of eligible individuals participating in a job-search activity, 17 percent in work experience, and 16 percent in education or training.[49]

Other pre-JOBS welfare employment programs defined employability according to objective criteria, which staff used to enroll participants in components when they entered the program. Most often, all eligible individuals who met a test of employability were assigned to job search. For example, the policy of the **New Jersey REACH Program**, which began in 1986 and has changed little under JOBS, describes an individual as job-ready if she has worked in a job that pays above minimum wage for at least six months during the previous two years; has worked

[48]Staff and client choice usually played a smaller role in decisions about immediate employability in fixed-sequence models that began with job search, though participants' preferences may have been important to decisions about education, training, and other subsequent activities.

[49] See J. Quint, *Maryland: Interim Findings from the Maryland Employment Initiatives Programs* (New York: MDRC, 1984).

in an occupation that is in demand in the local labor market; or has recently completed vocational training.[50]

Assessment in REACH, a program that is mandatory for welfare recipients with children at least two years old and that is usually operated by county welfare departments, highlights the role of local variation and client choice in welfare-to-work programs. REACH participants go through a quick screening process when they enter the program. It focuses on their work experience, employment goals, and English-speaking ability. Individuals who are not assigned to job search or ESL classes as a result of the screening are referred to another organization for an in-depth vocational assessment that includes a formal test of basic skills. Aside from the criteria for job-readiness described above, the state has not established criteria for assigning individuals to specific JOBS activities in this program.

Each local REACH program is allowed to choose the agency to conduct the REACH assessment. Most localities leave decisions about specific instruments, strategies, and topics to the assessment agency selected. As a result, assessments vary considerably across the state. In some counties, the agency responsible for assessment tests basic skills (often using TABE or ABLE) and vocational interests, and leaves additional testing to training providers. Other counties require a battery of vocational aptitude tests, interest inventories, and personality tests. Some assessments take only a few hours; others, several days.

The **Pennsylvania Saturation Work Program (PSWP)** was a demonstration project operated between October 1985 and September 1987 in two sections of Philadelphia. It was designed to test the feasibility and effectiveness of a welfare-to-work program focused on high participation rates (the "caseload saturation" concept). PSWP designated participants as immediately employable if they had completed at least the tenth grade or had a GED *and* had been employed for six months during the previous two years or had a current job skill.[51] To systematize the assessment process, the Urban Institute developed a data-collection instrument that served both to document these employability characteristics and to guide staff choices for program assignments. After the initial determination of participants' potential for immediate placement in a job, participants took a short (48-minute) test that assessed their reading and math levels, knowledge of work and job-search techniques, and occupational interests. Job-ready participants were referred to independent job search. Based on the test results and an individual interview, staff assigned the others to basic education, employment workshops, or vocational training.

Although PSWP issued guidelines rather than hard-and-fast rules for activity assignments, it emphasized quick job placement. However, staff tended to refer participants to basic education programs rather than job search if they had not

[50]See "REACH Policy and Planning Update #6," issued by the New Jersey Department of Human Services in 1987. Prior to implementation of JOBS, "eighth-grade reading and mathematics ability" was also considered to be evidence that a REACH participant had job skills and experience applicable to the local labor market.

[51]S. Hogarth, R. Martin, and K. Nazar, *Pennsylvania Saturation Work Program: Impact Evaluation* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, October 15, 1989).

completed school, even if they had some job experience. Individuals for whom vocational training seemed appropriate (on the basis of the screening test) were referred to training providers, who then did the same type of in-depth assessment as for any applicant to their training programs.

Assessment begins with a standardized test in **California's Greater Avenues for Independence (GAIN) Program**, which began in 1986 and has continued to operate with some modifications as a mandatory statewide JOBS program. During orientation, all English-speaking participants take a reading and math achievement test. Those with scores above a specified level who have a high school diploma are assigned to job search. The rest have the option of enrolling in basic education (or ESL) or an immediate job-search activity.[52] The initial GAIN assessment and assignment process is quite systematized and based on prescribed criteria. In-depth vocational assessments are conducted only for participants who complete an initial job-search activity without success, or who complete an education program followed by job search and are still unemployed.

As noted in Chapter 4, GAIN's testing instrument is the California Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS). But while testing is uniform, actual practice in making program assignments varies from county to county. In some counties, all GAIN participants who are determined to need education on the basis of their CASAS scores are strongly encouraged to choose this option (instead of job search); in one county, a local quota for entries to employment encourages GAIN staff to downplay the education option for clients who score low on the appraisal test; in others, the choice between education and job search is made more variably.[53]

In GAIN, responsibility for in-depth vocational assessment is contracted out by each county and the vocational assessment is done only after participants have completed education or job search. The procedures followed by the JTPA agency in one county illustrate just how lengthy and intensive such assessments can be. In this local program, the vocational assessment begins with a four-hour group session. It includes two standardized tests—the Career Occupational Preference Survey (COPS), which is an interest inventory, and the Career Ability Preference Survey (CAPS), which measures reading ability, perception of spatial relations, manual dexterity, and math skills—and group exercises in which participants talk about themselves and read aloud.

In this county, these activities are followed by two-hour individual sessions with staff to discuss each participant's employment and education background, living situation, family issues, economic situation and needs, and career options test results. Participants who have no clear idea about what they want to do are scheduled for additional tests, but these individuals are few, according to staff. The discussion is intended to educate clients about career options and the requirements of different training programs. At the end of their interviews, participants are told to think about their options, discuss them with friends and family, visit some

[52]J. Riccio et al., *GAIN: Early Implementation Experiences and Lessons* (New York: MDRC, 1989).

[53]See Riccio et al., *GAIN: Early Implementation Experiences and Lessons*, and S. Freedman and J. Riccio, *GAIN: Participation Patterns in Four Counties* (New York: MDRC, 1991).

training centers, and return in a week for another two-hour session to decide on the recommendations that will go to the GAIN staff.

In another California county, where in-depth vocational assessments are done by a vocational training vendor, GAIN participants also take the COPS and CAPS tests. In addition, at the discretion of the staff, they generally take a personality test and an achievement test measuring basic skills in grade-level equivalents. Participants typically take each test on a different day; each time they come in, they meet individually with staff. These discussions cover their employment history, education background, financial situation, and family issues. Participants are also asked to visit training vendors and to talk with teachers and employers about the job market and the training required for different occupations. Although the testing itself takes only six to eight hours, the assessment process typically takes up to two months.

Two other programs illustrate additional variations on in-depth vocational assessment. In some locations in Maine's JOBS program, called **ASPIRE**, a structured, in-depth vocational assessment is conducted by the JTPA agency (the Training Development Corporation) at the start of program participation. The process takes several weeks and includes formal testing to determine the individual's vocational aptitudes (using APTICOM), reading and math skills (the full-length TABE), and job interests; three days in a career exploration workshop (activities include researching the local labor market and the skill requirements and work environments of different occupations); and interviews with staff that result in a personality profile. The emphasis throughout the assessment, according to staff, is on "client empowerment"—helping the women to make responsible decisions about their lives and futures.

Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW) of Washington, D.C., operates a wide-ranging, intensive, structured assessment lasting two to three weeks (three to five hours a day). Participants in WOW are minority single mothers between ages 19 and 35, and most receive AFDC. The assessment is designed to help the women choose an education or training program and to expand their sense of what they can do. It focuses on career exploration to show that numerous options are available, including nontraditional jobs that pay better than many traditional ones. As part of the assessment, participants are taken to work sites to see actual job conditions and given opportunities to meet with employers and employees in a variety of occupations. WOW does not do formal testing to determine vocational aptitudes or interests; program staff believe that the job market is changing so rapidly that such tools are of little help to the participants. But they work with the women to document their work experience, including volunteer activities as well as paid employment. Literacy testing is an important part of the assessment, but it is not done at the beginning of the program because of staff concerns about test anxiety.

Project Match, a voluntary welfare employment program for long-term welfare recipients who live in public housing in Chicago, takes an approach to basic skills assessment that is consistent with its small scale and emphasis on client choice. Project Match does no formal testing but uses informal, staff-intensive strategies to

evaluate participants' basic skills and their relevance to employability.[54] To judge basic skills, staff members observe participants' speaking ability during enrollment interviews, learn about their personal backgrounds, and analyze the forms participants fill out during intake and assessment. Staff members also call participants' schools to talk with former teachers, both to verify information provided by the participants and to gain a better understanding of their experiences and attitudes.

Project Match participants rarely choose education when they enter the program. They are more interested in immediate employment and tend to come back to Project Match for education only after they have cycled through several jobs, according to program staff.

Oklahoma's Integrated Family Services (IFS) Program, which operates in nine counties, assesses social service needs intensively and attempts to address a host of family issues, including those that affect parents' employability. Staffed by a special unit within the state Department of Human Services, the IFS program is designed for families identified as having multiple needs that cannot be handled simply by referring the family members to services. The criteria for defining a multiple-needs family are set by a committee in each county and reflect local service priorities. (Teenage mothers on AFDC are a frequent target group; others include families affected by plant closings, families with a member fighting drug or alcohol dependency, and families with a medical crisis.) Families are referred for IFS services by multiple sources within the community.

The initial assessment is conducted by an IFS caseworker during a home visit, which typically takes about 45 minutes. It results in a report on the family's perception of its needs and the caseworker's observations about how well the family is functioning. Caseworkers are encouraged to use their informed judgment in conducting assessments; to facilitate this, assessment protocols require descriptive observations rather than answers to narrowly defined questions.

Based on the information obtained during the initial home visit, an inter-agency team meets to decide what interventions seem appropriate and feasible, and which organizations can best provide the needed services. An IFS caseworker coordinates the effort to resolve the family problems. Additional home visits are made as needed to monitor progress. By design, IFS caseloads are kept small—a maximum of 25 per caseworker. A case remains open until the family is able to work on its problems without IFS help through other social service programs, or until the service goals of the plan have been met.

[54]See L. Olson and T. Herr, *Building Opportunity for Disadvantaged Young Families: The Project Match Experience* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research, February 1989); and Herr and Halpern, *Changing What Counts*.

Chapter 8

Operational Considerations

The multiplicity of assessment options, and competing claims about their benefits, can be daunting. Not only do JOBS administrators need to make judgments about the likely effectiveness of different approaches to assessment, they also need to understand the implications of their assessment choices for the efficient operation of their programs, and how well those choices can be carried out in the program environment. Often, practical considerations—such as whether JOBS participants will be more likely to keep one type of assessment appointment than another—can be decisive, especially when it is not clear how much different assessment approaches affect participants' employment and earnings or welfare receipt.

This chapter describes such considerations, beginning with illustrations of "client flow" in programs discussed in the previous chapter: Assessment can speed this up or slow it down. Also discussed here are funding, staffing, information-management, and other issues.

Client Flow in JOBS: How Many Participants Go Where How Quickly?

Getting participants to "where they are going" in JOBS is not simple, and pre-JOBS programs offer lessons about how assessment affects client flow.

1. The experience of programs that have used a relatively extensive assessment as their initial sorting mechanism suggests that this practice may delay or reduce entry into employment-related components:

- In the Pennsylvania Saturation Work Program (PSWP), in which the initial assessment was designed to serve as a quick screen and sorter, backlogs of 6 to 12 weeks in scheduling orientations and appraisals led staff to eliminate assessment for individuals who had a high school diploma or GED, or recent work experience and current work skills.
- New Jersey REACH staff reported that about 50 percent of the clients referred to an outside agency for in-depth assessment did not show up for their first appointment, slowing their progress through the assessment process.
- In California, most of the eight counties included in MDRC's early implementation study of GAIN were able to move participants through the initial appraisal within three weeks of orientation. But in one county—which emphasized personal counseling and had a high staff-client caseload ratio—the initial appraisal interview did not take place until three months after GAIN orientation. Also, while vocational assessments in most GAIN locations required only between 6 and 12 hours of interviews and tests, it typically took participants two to four days to complete the process, and sometimes as long as two to four weeks.

- The in-depth assessment provided by one JTPA agency for participants in Maine's ASPIRE program is scheduled to last two to three weeks, but staff report it frequently takes a month to complete.
- Wider Opportunities for Women, a voluntary program serving a population similar to that targeted in JOBS, reports that only 50 percent of those who start the lengthy assessment process complete it and enter an education or training program.

2. **Because of normal welfare caseload dynamics, JOBS programs will experience considerable declines in participation in the activities that occur second, third, and fourth in a sequence, regardless of the nature of the components.**[55] Furthermore, the longer it takes for participants to get to their first activity, the fewer will participate. Some will have left welfare on their own; some who were available to attend an initial orientation will have developed problems with child care, transportation, or health; some will have moved; and some will have lost interest. On the other hand, assessment approaches that succeed in building commitment and providing needed supports may overcome some of this "natural" tendency for participation to decline over time.

3. **Early literacy testing probably leads to a higher rate of assignment to education than literacy testing at a later stage of a program.** JOBS regulations define basic literacy as functioning at an 8.9-grade level and specify education for participants who are not proficient at this level (unless they have completed high school or its equivalent or have long-term employment goals that do not require a high school education). These regulations pose a dilemma for states and localities implementing JOBS programs intended to emphasize immediate employment: Should the basic literacy skills of all participants be measured using standardized tests as a first step, or should testing take place after an initial program activity? Because the sequence of activity options offered to participants, and the way staff present these options, can have a profound influence on what participants choose for themselves, this is a key assessment design choice. When staff and participants have literacy test results in hand indicating basic skills below the ninth-grade level, they may believe that basic skills remediation is their only option. But individuals with low literacy skills can (and often prefer to) find jobs, especially where the AFDC grant amount for most recipients is less than local entry-level wages.

Resources for Assessment

Administrators of JOBS programs that offer multiple activity options at an early stage face a different problem: Is it more efficient to try to perfect the match between participants and services by conducting very comprehensive and intensive assessments, or to guide choices with less formal assessment and tolerate changes in assignments when matches do not work out? Another key question is whether, for philosophical reasons, uniform assessment strategies (as opposed to targeted or

[55]See Gueron and Pauly, *From Welfare to Work*.

staged strategies) are desirable. In general, the scale of a JOBS program and the resources available for assessment are most critical in answering these questions. Many programs will not be able to afford comprehensive and intensive assessments for all participants. **To conserve resources, policymakers in states and localities operating multiple-option JOBS programs may need to choose strategies that match low-cost assessment approaches to low-cost services and high-cost assessment approaches to high-cost services.**

MDRC's GAIN implementation research found that staff in counties with low staff-client ratios—i.e., limited human resources—were more likely to process assessments routinely, to make assignment decisions as though they were prescribed, even when participants were allowed a choice, and to accept participants' career preferences without in-depth exploration.[56] **If the philosophy of a JOBS program is to encourage exploration and client participation in assignment decisions, the resources to make this possible must be provided, for example, by maintaining high staff-client ratios in JOBS or contracting for this assessment service with other organizations.** To illustrate: Twice as many clients can be moved through an initial intake process in a day if interviews last a half hour instead of an hour; twice as many staff members are needed to handle the same number of clients if interviews take one hour instead of a half hour. Similarly, an assessment of basic literacy that uses a 2½-hour test will require more staff or more time than an assessment that uses a one-hour test.

If resources for assessment in JOBS are limited, cost-reduction choices include:

- Less expensive technologies (e.g., paper-and-pencil tests rather than computerized assessment systems);
- Information-gathering methods that entail less staff time (e.g., those that rely on self-completed forms, group procedures, and brief one-on-one interviews rather than extensive testing and one-on-one counseling);
- Strategies that take advantage of welfare caseload dynamics (people leaving welfare on their own) to minimize the number of participants who need to be assessed (e.g., by conducting in-depth or more intensive assessments at a later rather than an earlier stage in the program);
- Strategies that take advantage of the assessment activities that occur in certain program components such as basic skills education; and
- Targeting strategies (e.g., conducting more expensive assessments for participants who select or have passed staff screening for more expensive services).

[56]Riccio et al., *GAIN: Early Implementation Experiences and Lessons.*

Sequencing Assessment

As discussed in Chapter 5, vocational assessments can be time-consuming and expensive. Because most training providers require a minimum literacy level, the decision to send a participant to training can depend on her basic literacy skills. Individuals who do not meet the requisite skill levels will presumably require education before entering training, unless JOBS program administrators can make special arrangements with training vendors, or local options include both education and training. It may therefore be sensible to defer an in-depth vocational assessment until a participant has attained the necessary literacy skills to enter training.

Vocational assessment could thus be designed as a two-stage process. An initial assessment can elicit enough information (on basic skills, education, job skills, work experience, and general vocational goals) to determine whether training is an appropriate first activity. If so, the individual could then go through an in-depth vocational assessment to determine a specific training course. If not, the in-depth assessment could be deferred until training is deemed appropriate. Similarly, literacy assessment may be structured as a two-stage process. First could come up-front screening to establish the basic skills levels of all participants. A later assessment could indicate the type of education program that participants with low basic skills need. Then—for those referred to education—an in-depth diagnosis to determine more precisely the strengths and weaknesses to be addressed might be carried out by the educational institution. The lengthier and more detailed test required for diagnostic assessment can wait until participants actually enter an education program.

This strategy makes sense for the client as well as the program. The intervening time and activities might enable her to expand her horizons and refine her career goals, particularly if career exploration is part of the process. In addition, because many of the tests used in a vocational assessment are written for individuals with a seventh- or eighth-grade reading level, they are not appropriate for participants reading below that level. Used with less skilled readers, the tests may not provide an accurate picture of vocational aptitudes, interests, or knowledge.

A two-tiered strategy also makes sense from the client-flow perspective. Because of the large proportion of participants in welfare employment programs found to need basic education—combined with the effect of normal turnover in reducing participation in the later activities of sequenced programs—only a small proportion of those who enter JOBS programs without the basic skills required for training will in fact enter a training program. Early information from MDRC's evaluation of GAIN, for example, showed that within six months of program entry, less than 1 percent of the mandatory caseload had completed the in-depth assessment and entered a post-assessment education or training activity.[57] (This reflects, among other things, the large percentage of participants referred to education and the length of time it took them to complete that component.) Data from longer follow-up on the Baltimore Options and San Diego Saturation Work Initiative Model (SWIM) programs found that less than a third of the program enrollees participated

[57]Riccio et al., *GAIN: Early Implementation Experiences and Lessons*, p. 85, Table 4.3.

in two or more activities, and only a small proportion of those entered vocational training.[58]

A final sequencing consideration is that, in at least one instance, an up-front, lengthy, in-depth vocational assessment process has been criticized by welfare advocates for creating an artificial barrier to program participation. Although the JTPA assessment used for ASPIRE participants in one area in Maine is intended to increase participants' empowerment and self-knowledge, the assessment has been challenged as a way of delaying and denying services rather than providing them.

Tailoring Assessment to Different Subgroups

JOBS planners should also give thought to tailoring assessments to the specific needs of different subgroups of participants. Teenage mothers and women who have been on AFDC for many years, for example, may need in-depth social service assessments and vocational exploration, because they frequently face difficult family situations and their knowledge of the work world is often limited. As noted in Chapter 5, some testing instruments have been specifically designed for young adults. The special needs of immigrants and non-English speakers may be better identified if an assessment employs instruments developed specifically for such groups and also addresses their understanding of U.S. culture. A number of literacy tests (including CASAS) have versions designed for those with very limited ability in English.

Staffing Issues

Dividing Program Responsibilities

Welfare-to-work programs have taken a variety of approaches to staffing the initial assessment interview. Some have separated orientation and assessment from other activities, creating positions in which staff perform only those functions and have no ongoing contact with participants. Others give responsibility for the initial assessment to case managers, who continue to work with clients throughout their participation in JOBS. Field research in MDRC's GAIN evaluation found that when case managers did assessments, they took a more personal interest in clients and probed more deeply into their circumstances and plans. However, there is no research evidence to show that one approach—or one staffing pattern—leads to greater program impacts than another.[59]

Case management may be particularly important in programs that attempt to address the needs of JOBS participants' families. To date, a hallmark of the few welfare-to-work programs that take this approach is intensive and aggressive case

[58]G. Hamilton, "Participant Flow Patterns in Different Types of Welfare Employment Programs," unpublished MDRC document, May 16, 1990.

[59]See J. Riccio and K. Sherwood, *Key Decisions in Implementing JOBS: Lessons from California's GAIN Program* (New York: MDRC, 1990).

management by specialized staff.[60] There is no evidence to show that this is the most efficient or the only possible staffing arrangement for such programs, however.

Multiple responsibilities can create problems in moving clients through a sequence of activities. In one welfare employment program operated in the 1980s, for example, the staff responsible for the initial assessment interviews were also responsible for conducting the job-search workshops that participants attended after assessment. The dual roles were found to be somewhat in conflict: The more time staff spent on assessments, the fewer workshops they scheduled. Backlogs developed at both ends.

Many programs refer participants to outside agencies for in-depth assessments of their readiness for vocational training and recommendations for specific training courses, whether such assessments are done initially or later. Typically, the welfare agency contracts with another organization—most commonly, the local JTPA agency or a community college—to conduct vocational assessments of all the clients it refers, and to recommend appropriate occupations and specific training or education courses in a written report. In some states, staff from the two agencies meet to discuss individual cases. After the report is completed, the JOBS participant discusses it with a JOBS staff member, and the welfare agency prepares an employability plan.

Some states simply contract for whatever assessment is usually done by the outside agency. Others set standards for the assessment process and instruments, and do not pay for any testing that does not meet those standards, or they negotiate for specific assessment practices and procedures. As mentioned, the amount of money and the number of clients likely to flow from the JOBS program to these other organizations often give the welfare agency considerable leverage.

The rationale for contracting out the vocational assessment is that the education and training agencies have more expertise in such matters than the welfare agency and have already made the necessary capital investment. In addition, it can help prevent situations in which welfare recipients complete an in-depth assessment at the welfare agency only to go through a similar evaluation process at a service provider agency.

Disadvantages of such arrangements are that the welfare agency can lose control over the assessment process and that the philosophical approach of the other agency may not reflect that of the JOBS program. In addition, some staff in both California and New Jersey reported that if the agency doing the assessment is itself a service provider, the assessments tend to recommend that JOBS participants enroll in the agency's services. JOBS staff also voiced concern that provider agencies often use assessments to screen people in or out of specific program offerings, rather than to find the most appropriate service among a range of providers. Referrals to outside agencies for assessment also require careful monitoring to track the progress of participants, particularly if the assessment takes several days or weeks to complete.

[60]See Golden et al., *Welfare Reform and Poor Children.*

Staff Qualifications

Here, too, program experience is varied and there is little consensus. Upgraded eligibility workers, case managers with social service backgrounds, and employment specialists have all been used to do appraisals and assessments in work/welfare programs. Programs tend to hire people with more than a high school education for such positions, but this is not always the case. Nor do states always require that staff be college graduates. The regulations governing California's GAIN program are quite explicit in specifying the qualifications of staff who conduct in-depth vocational assessments—either graduation from an accredited college or two years of counseling experience—but other states have not established hiring guidelines for their subcontractors.[61]

When asked what qualifications are necessary, program administrators note the importance of other criteria in addition to formal education or prior experience. Some stress the need for staff with good "people skills" who can draw clients out about their goals and circumstances. Experts and practitioners interviewed for this paper stressed that an assessment staff needs a thorough knowledge of the vocational training and education offerings in the area and the characteristics of the institutions that offer them, as well as an awareness of outside sources that could help meet participants' supportive-service needs. They also mentioned the importance of personal networking to develop that knowledge.

On-the-job training is important for staff responsible for assessments, particularly if they have not previously performed them. Many programs offer training to those who are new to the role, but several states mentioned the need for ongoing training in both assessments and assignments. (Several commercial testing systems, including CASAS and VITAS, provide training for the staff who will use their instruments.)

How Assessment Staff Interpret Program Goals

The attitudes and philosophy of assessment staff will influence the choice of activities and thus affect the flow of participants and the use of resources. In PSWP in Philadelphia, for example, although the program objective was to move participants quickly into employment, staff started to refer individuals who did poorly on a basic skills test into basic education classes, because they felt the test results indicated that the participants needed education in order to be employable. In some GAIN counties, also, staff tended to steer individuals into education programs rather than job search when the program model called for a choice. In Maine, up-front, in-depth vocational assessment that emphasizes career exploration and preparation for employment leading to self-sufficiency instead of quick job placement has tended to route participants into long-term training and education activities. As a result, there are not always sufficient resources to meet the needs of new enrollees.

Staff training and administrative oversight are essential to ensure that assessment procedures are either carried out as intended or *intentionally* modified. Involving

[61]See Riccio et al., *GAIN: Early Implementation Experiences and Lessons*, p. 220.

program staff in the design of assessment approaches is another way to improve consistency between their decisions and administrators' goals.

Keeping Track of Information

To avoid duplication of effort, JOBS planners need to ensure that information collected at one point in the process is passed on to staff at later stages. This can be hard to do when some assessment functions are performed by outside agencies or staff. JOBS staff members who conduct assessments should be given all the information derived from in-house assessments, including work history, education, employment goals and interests, test results, and social service needs. They will also need to know the findings of assessments conducted by an outside agency, and vice versa. Devising procedures to be certain that information flows smoothly in both directions is worth the trouble.

Ideally, each step in the assessment process should build on or add to the information previously collected; it is wasteful of staff resources and tedious for participants if different stages in the assessment process repeatedly elicit the same information. JOBS programs will therefore need a record-keeping system that updates and adds information on the participant and her JOBS activities throughout her participation in the program, and makes this information readily available to staff. To ensure that the records will be reviewed and used at subsequent stages in the process, it may be useful to have them routinely provided to the staff responsible for different parts of an assessment, rather than simply making them available upon request.

Conclusion

Program Design and Assessment Trade-offs

By introducing new incentives for investing in human capital and serving more welfare recipients in employment programs, JOBS puts a premium on the ability of program operators to match participants to services that will improve their job prospects. But the best methods for doing this are still in doubt—in part because the available evidence does not permit accurate predictions of what it takes to succeed in the job market, and in part because definitions of success vary. Assessment technologies and strategies can help pinpoint a variety of participant characteristics that suggest paths to employment and, perhaps, self-sufficiency, but they do not promise either a precise plan or a sure outcome. Thus, in the same way that the basic structure of JOBS presents choices to program planners, designing an assessment system for JOBS entails trade-offs. The premise of this paper is that, to the extent that previous experience and research can help, JOBS planners need to know what they are trading off when they choose among assessment approaches.

An important potential trade-off, but one that cannot be precisely quantified, is between short-term and long-term gains for program participants. Underlying the assessment function—and central to the innovations in JOBS—is the notion that some groups of participants will not make either short-term or long-term gains in earnings without some type of education or training. Also embedded in many assessment approaches is the idea that some individuals who could make short-term gains will do better in the long run if their basic literacy skills or vocational skills are upgraded through education or training. (Often, the corollary is that skills upgrading cannot take place on the job.)

Should assessment be geared toward short-term or long-term gains? This question can be answered only in the context of JOBS program goals, which assessment approaches reflect. One lesson that some pre-JOBS program operators learned is that **formal assessment approaches—i.e., those that employ standardized tests—tend to tip programs more toward education and training and less toward immediate employment.** There are many reasons for this: Formal assessment procedures uncover and highlight the generally poor basic skills of the welfare population; staff who conduct these assessments are often philosophically inclined toward human capital investments (especially if they work for education or vocational training providers); assessment results may influence participants' preferences by raising their awareness of their own needs for education and training; and front-line staff in welfare employment programs draw conclusions about what works based on their direct experience with clients, which is often concentrated among individuals who return to welfare after spells of employment that lead neither to skills improvement nor to earnings sufficient to support their families.

On the other hand, formal assessment approaches do not *necessarily* defer employment. They can be designed to balance program goals and participants'

needs. Choosing human capital investments in the form of education and training over immediate employment, with the objective of improving long-term gains for welfare recipients, may be the focus of a particular JOBS program and is certainly encouraged by the legislation. **However, state and local JOBS administrators should be aware that if they want to stress immediate employment for some participants, comprehensive and intensive up-front assessment procedures—unless they are carefully designed and targeted—may work against this short-term goal.**

At the heart of the decisions that state and local JOBS administrators have to make about designing an assessment system in JOBS are three thorny issues: (1) Solid evidence on the effectiveness of assessment in employment and training programs, both generally and for particular approaches, is sketchy; (2) assessment is a program expense that, in some localities, will reduce the funds available for employment-related services, so investing wisely in this service is doubly important; and (3) there are similar trade-offs in deciding about assessment approaches as in deciding about other program services. When resources are limited, programs can provide a little assessment for everyone, a lot of assessment for a small group, or targeted assessment for participants for whom this service is most needed or most likely to pay off in better "matches" with employment services.

Selected MDRC Publications

BOOKS

From Welfare to Work (Russell Sage Foundation). 1991. A summary is published separately by MDRC.

Summary and Findings of the National Supported Work Demonstration. 1980.

Tenant Management. 1981.

MONOGRAPHS

The Challenge of Serving Teenage Mothers: Lessons from Project Redirection. 1988.

Lessons from a Job Guarantee: The Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects. 1984.

Lessons on Transitional Employment: The STETS Demonstration for Mentally Retarded Workers. 1985.

Linking Welfare and Education (Papers for Practitioners Series). 1992.

Reforming Welfare with Work (The Ford Foundation). 1987.

REPORTS

WELFARE-TO-WORK PROGRAMS

The Demonstration of State Work/Welfare Initiatives

Arkansas: Final Report. 1985.

California: Final Report. 1986.

Illinois: Final Report. 1987.

Maine: Final Report. 1988.

Maryland: Final Report. 1985.

Maryland: Supplemental Report. 1987.

New Jersey: Final Report. 1988.

Subgroup Impacts and Performance Indicators for Selected Welfare Employment Programs. 1988.

Virginia: Final Report. 1986.

Welfare Grant Diversion. 1986.

West Virginia: Final Report. 1986.

The GAIN Evaluation

GAIN: Child Care in a Welfare Employment Initiative. 1989.

GAIN: Early Implementation Experiences and Lessons. 1989.

GAIN: Participation Patterns in Four Counties. 1991.

GAIN: Planning and Early Implementation. 1987.

GAIN: Program Strategies, Participation Patterns, and First-Year Impacts in Six Counties. 1992.

The Louisville WIN Laboratory Project

Job Search Strategies. 1983.

Welfare Women in a Group Job Search Program. 1982.

The SEID Program

Self-Employment for Welfare Recipients: Implementation Report. 1991.

The SWIM Demonstration

Final Report on the Saturation Work Initiative Model in San Diego. 1989.

Interim Report on the Saturation Work Initiative Model in San Diego. 1988.

PROGRAMS FOR TEENAGE PARENTS

The LEAP Evaluation

LEAP: Implementation Report. 1991.

The New Chance Demonstration

New Chance: Implementation Report. 1991.

New Chance: Lessons from the Pilot Phase. 1989.

New Chance: Life Skills and Opportunities Curriculum (MDRC and Public/Private Ventures). 1989.

Project Redirection

Building Self-Sufficiency in Pregnant and Parenting Teens: Final Implementation Report. 1984.

Final Impacts from Project Redirection. 1985.

YOUTH PROGRAMS

The Career Beginnings Demonstration

Career Beginnings Impact Evaluation. 1990.

The JOBSTART Demonstration

Assessing JOBSTART: Interim Impacts. 1991.

Implementing JOBSTART. 1989.

Launching JOBSTART. 1987.

The Youth Entitlement Demonstration

Linking School and Work for Disadvantaged Youths — The YIEPP Demonstration: Final Implementation Report. 1982.

Post-Program Impacts of the Youth Incentive Entitlement Pilot Projects. 1984.

THE NATIONAL JTPA STUDY

Implementing the National JTPA Study. 1990.

The National JTPA Study: Final Implementation Report. 1992.

THE PARENTS' FAIR SHARE DEMONSTRATION

Caring and Paying: What Fathers and Mothers Say About Child Support. 1992.

MANPOWER DEMONSTRATION
RESEARCH CORPORATION

THREE PARK AVENUE
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10016
(212) 532-3200

1669 BUSH STREET
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94109
(415) 441-7607

MDRC